earlier. These issues did not prove easy to resolve. The united Goths were too powerful to be quickly despatched. In 395, and again in 397, they were confronted by a substantial Roman army, but actual fighting was limited, probably because the forces were too evenly matched for either side to risk engaging with the enemy.[48] At the same time, old attitudes died hard, and no Roman politician was about to rush into granting the Goths new terms. Frustrated in his desire for a political deal, Alaric set his men loose. Once more, it was the provincial population of the Balkans that suffered. The revolt first broke out in Thrace in the north-east, but between 395 and 397 the Goths worked their way all the way south to Athens, then west and north up the Adriatic coast as far as Epirus, cheerfully pillaging as they went, while all the time putting out feelers for a new political deal.

Court politics in Constantinople were highly volatile during these years. Theodosius' older son, the eastern emperor Arcadius, though twenty years old in 397 never actively ruled, but was always surrounded by a swarm of ambitious politicians seeking power through his favour. By 397, currently the most powerful of these courtiers, the eunuch Chamberlain Eutropius, was ready to negotiate. He made Alaric a Roman general and granted the Goths the better terms and extra guarantees they required. He allowed them to settle in Dacia and Macedonia, and probably arranged for local produce, levied as tax in kind, to be diverted to their subsistence. Eutropius' fate is highly instructive. Eunuchs were generally figures of ridicule in the Roman world, portrayed as immoral and greedy: just the sort to go soft on barbarians demanding money with menaces. As both a eunuch and a Goth appeaser, Eutropius' position was vulnerable, and was brilliantly exploited by his opponents. He was duly toppled in the summer of 399.[49] His successors tore up the agreement with Alaric and refused to negotiate further.

Over the next two years Constantinople saw frequent regime change, but no eastern politician was prepared to talk to Alaric; granting the Goths the kind of terms they might accept would be political suicide. In the year 400, a political coup was staged in Constantinople against Gainas, a Roman general of Gothic origins who was one of several contenders for power after Eutropius' fall. The prominence of Gainas – and other generals of non-Roman origin like him – follows on from the reorganization of the army in the late Roman period. Unlike the early Roman period when only Roman citizens were recruited into the legions, anyone could serve in the politically important field armies (*comitatenses*) of the later Empire. There was nothing to stop able individuals of non-Roman origin from rising through comitatensian ranks to acquire political prominence. As a result, from the early- to mid-fourth century onwards, a series of generals of barbarian origin figure in accounts of court politics. Occasionally, such men had, or were suspected of having, designs on the purple itself. Silvanus, of Frankish origins, was one case in point: one of our historians, Ammianus Marcellinus, participated in an assassination mission to remove him. Much more often, however, 'barbarian' generals jostled with civilian politicians to wield influence behind the throne. But, whatever hostile sources may say, there is no evidence that these generals were anything other than entirely loyal to the Empire. Some of those labelled 'barbarian' were classically educated second-generation immigrants – as fully Roman, in other words, as anybody else.

A dominant figure in Constantinople in autumn 399, Gainas was ousted by some of his erstwhile allies early in the next year. He was, it seems, a first-generation Gothic immigrant, and hence an easy target for anti-barbarian propaganda, but particularly so at a time when Alaric's Goths were rampaging through the Balkans. There is no evidence, however, that he had the slightest intention of making common cause with them. In the violent coup that broke his hold on power, Gainas managed to get out of Constantinople alive, but several thousand Goths, including many women and children who lived in the city as part of the east Roman military establishment, were massacred. In the aftermath, Alaric's Goths faced no direct military threat from the east Roman armies, but they were now excluded from Constantinopolitan politics, and soon lost all hope of obtaining a new agreement. To try to break the deadlock, in the autumn of 401 Alaric took his followers to Italy and attempted over the next twelve months to extract a deal from Stilicho, effective ruler of the western Empire, instead. Again, Alaric tried intimidation, but Stilicho was no more forthcoming than the successors of Eutropius had been in the east. Cut off from the established sources of supply available to them in the Balkans, the Goths could not maintain their Italian adventure indefinitely.[50] In the autumn/winter of 402/3, two drawn battles later, they retreated back over the Dinaric Alps to their old haunts in Dacia and Macedonia.

Alaric had had no choice. And he had now to think again about how to get one half or other of the Empire round the negotiating table. The Goths re-established themselves in the same areas of the Balkans they had occupied between 397 and 401 – reactivating, one presumes, the sources of supply that had sustained them then. And here they remained for over three years. Stuck in a political wasteland, they found themselves caught, literally and metaphorically, between the eastern and western halves of the Empire, waiting for someone to give them a call. Late in 406, an approach eventually came – much to Alaric's amazement, I suspect – from Stilicho in Italy. Just four years earlier, the western regent-ruler had moved might and main to keep Alaric and his Goths at arm's length. Now, here he was courting them for an alliance. Even more peculiar, Stilicho made his approach to Alaric after the defeat of Radagaisus, when, as we have seen, the Rhine frontier was already showing clear signs of the turmoil that would boil over on to Roman territory. But what Stilicho proposed was an alliance in which he and Alaric would both fight Constantinople, not deal with the problems on the Rhine. To understand Stilicho's seemingly bizarre behaviour, and how its unforeseen consequences led to the sack of Rome, we need to take a closer look at the western generalissimo and his position in the great scheme of things.

Stilicho and Alaric

Flavius Stilicho is a figure about whom opinion – ancient and modern – is heavily divided. He was a particularly successful product of the late Roman career path that saw non-Romans – such as Gainas – rise through the military to political prominence. The son of a Roman cavalry officer of Vandal origins and a Roman mother, he enjoyed a distinguished military career at the court of Theodosius I in Constantinople, holding a series of prestigious staff appointments in the 380s and early 390s. In 393, he accompanied his emperor west on the campaign against the usurper Eugenius, and in its aftermath was appointed senior general (*comes et magister utriusque militiae praesentalis*) in command of the western Empire's armed forces. Early in 395, Theodosius died unexpectedly in Milan at the age of forty-nine, having apparently appointed Stilicho guardian to his younger son Honorius, who had also come west. At least, that's what Stilicho reported about a deathbed conversation he had had with the emperor, and there was no one there to deny it. Theodosius' older son, Arcadius, was left to govern the east from Constantinople. Born in September 384, Honorius was less than ten years old on his father's death, and so the reins of power fell naturally into Stilicho's hands.

The general's career had thus far been entirely eastern in focus, but now he found himself undisputed ruler of the west. A clear sign of his need to build bridges to every wielder of power and influence is his careful courting of the old Roman Senate. In May 395, he passed a law rehabilitating all those who had held office under the usurper Eugenius – a huge gesture in that direction.[51] Sometime after 395, our old friend Symmachus – enjoying an Indian summer, to judge from his correspondence – suddenly found himself amongst those being courted.[52] Perhaps two-thirds of his surviving letters were written between 395 and his death in 402, and these late letters show him as a man with considerable clout. For one thing, he was able to rescue his son-in-law Nicomachus Flavianus from the consequences of having served as Urban Prefect under Eugenius, securing a political rehabilitation which culminated in his becoming Urban Prefect once again in 399–400 under Honorius and Stilicho, and with his landed fortune protected.[53] While not holding formal office, Symmachus also operated in the public sphere, in 397 playing a material role, as we shall see, in getting the Senate to declare Gildo, the commander in North Africa who would revolt against Stilicho in favour of Constantinople, a public enemy.

For more than a decade, as a result of this careful political courting, Stilicho held on to power: no mean feat, given the vicissitudes that fortune put in his way. Some were self-generated. The real truth about Theodosius' deathbed wishes will never be known. But shortly after his death, Stilicho claimed that the dying emperor had ordered that he be guardian of *both* of his children. As the poet Claudian, Stilicho's resident spin-doctor in Rome, put it to the Senate: 'Then was the power of Rome entrusted to your care, Stilicho; in your hands was placed the governance of the world. The brothers' twin majesty and the armies of both royal courts were given into your charge.'[54] Everything suggests – at least as regards Arcadius – that this was a lie, conveniently authorizing Stilicho to seek power in his native east, in addition to the power he already held in the west, where he had only recently taken up residence. He proceeded to act on the claim. The underlying aim of his two interventions on eastern territory, in 395 and 397, against Alaric's revolting Goths was to establish his credentials as the saviour – and hence natural ruler – of the east. These ambitions were firmly resisted by his peers in Constantinople. As we have seen, they were busy fighting among themselves for control of the inactive Arcadius, and the last thing any of them wanted was to see Stilicho riding over the horizon to their rescue. Not surprisingly, they now kept him at bay by throwing as many grenades in his direction as they could lay their hands on.

The most dangerous of these detonated in autumn 397, when the aforementioned military commander in Africa, Gildo, was induced to transfer his allegiance to Constantinople. This was a huge threat to Stilicho, because African grain was used to feed the city of Rome. Any disruption to the supply would quickly undermine his political position. In the event, he dealt with the crisis brilliantly, sending Gildo's brother Mascezel to North Africa. Gildo had been responsible for the death of his children, so Mascezel had grudges to burn off. The revolt was over by July 398, and Africa had returned to its traditional western allegiance before that year's harvest was in. Stilicho also weathered Alaric's invasion of Italy in 401/2 – which, though the Constantinopolitan authorities probably didn't authorize it, as has sometimes been thought, they certainly did nothing to discourage. Then, just three years later, came Radagaisus and his Gothic horde. Yet again, Stilicho coped – comfortably enough, in the end. Throughout all this, there were many components to his power – central and regional military establishments, the Senate of Rome and the imperial bureaucracy, to mention just three. But one thing was key: his relationship with Theodosius' son Honorius. To keep a firm grip on the emperor, as Honorius grew into adolescence, in 398 Stilicho married him to his daughter Maria. This added some extra security to the general's position, but relations with Honorius were bound to need some finessing as the young emperor matured.

Up to August 406, Stilicho walked this tightrope pretty well. He had failed to unite east and west, but Honorius remained firmly under his thumb. Africa had been induced to resume its western allegiance, and two Gothic assaults on Italy had been dealt with successfully. Then, in the aftermath of the defeat of Radagaisus occurred the most mysterious episode in Stilicho's career. At this point, things were already going wrong in the north. The first of the British usurpations had broken out; there was fighting east of the Rhine, and every indication that it would spill over on to Roman territory (though no inkling in any quarter of the scale of the forthcoming Rhine crossing or the form it would take). However, as we have seen, instead of moving north with every trained soldier he could muster, Stilicho picked a new fight with his counterparts in Constantinople. His aim in reopening hostilities at the tail end of 406 was much more limited than in 395/6. He demanded the return of the dioceses of Dacia and Macedonia (the eastern half of the prefecture of Illyricum, which had been transferred to the administrative control of Constantinople in the reign of Theodosius. Then, threatening war if the east resisted, he sought a military alliance with Alaric's Goths.

It is possible, of course, that Stilicho simply suffered a catastrophic failure of judgement, obsessed on the one hand with his eastern ambitions and, on the other, underestimating the crisis in the north. But even though he probably did fail to grasp the speed with which crisis was about to become disaster, I don't believe he lost the plot so completely. And I am not alone in this. The critical point here is that Stilicho was no longer trying to win power in Constantinople. His much more restricted aim – regaining Dacia and Macedonia in east Illyricum – suggests that there was some more specific issue, rather than pure vainglory, at stake. The mountains and upland basins of east Illyricum were a traditional recruiting ground for the Roman military (a bit like the Scottish Highlands for the British army). It has been suggested, therefore, that his apparently bizarre ambition to control east Illyricum in late 406 was linked to the unfolding crisis on the Rhine. Stilicho desperately needed military manpower, so winning back east Illyricum might have been a cunning plan to secure a vital recruiting ground. But it takes time to turn recruits into soldiers, and time was something that Stilicho conspicuously lacked. There was, however, one fully trained and experienced – even battle-hardened – military force already available in east Illyricum: the Goths of Alaric.

To understand why fighting Constantinople over east Illyricum might have something to do with winning Alaric's support against the broader northern threat, we also need to take account of the Gothic agenda. As Alaric had shown repeatedly since 395, he was perfectly willing to forge a military alliance with the Roman state, but the price had to be right, and the perceived deficiencies of the peace of 382 substantially rectified. As we know, this meant full recognition for their overall leader and a designated revenue-producing district legitimately earmarked for their support. (This is what they had got from Eutropius in 397, and they would continue to want it in the later 400s.) The only problem for Stilicho and Alaric was deciding precisely where the Goths should be established. In 406, their brief Italian job aside, they had been occupying Dacia and Macedonia since 397. But east Illyricum, contrary to established tradition, was currently part of the eastern Empire. Stilicho thus faced a dilemma. He could move the Goths from the territories they had occupied for the best part of a decade into lands that *he* controlled. This would give him the right to grant them the fully legal settlement they required, but would necessarily involve huge disruption, both for the Goths, and – perhaps more importantly from Stilicho's point of view – for the Roman landowners of any western territory into which the Goths might move. Alternatively, he could legitimize their control of the territories they *already* held, which would involve browbeating Constantinople into transferring east Illyricum back into his hands. The latter was his eventual choice, and was, on reflection, the simplest means of getting the Goths on side. Seen in this light, Stilicho's policies look far from crazy.

An alliance with Alaric's supergroup would give him the military manpower he needed to deal with the mayhem that was about to unfold in the north, and with little disruption to western territories. If all this involved a spat with Constantinople, then so be it.[55]

The Fall of Stilicho and After

AS PART OF Stilicho's deal with Alaric, it was agreed that, for the assault on the eastern Empire, the Goths would be reinforced by a substantial contingent from the Roman army of Italy. I imagine he supposed that a display of his military resources, rather than a set-piece assault on Constantinople, would be sufficient to make the east hand back the disputed dioceses. To this end, Alaric moved his forces into Epirus (modern Albania), within what was still the formally west Roman territory of west Illyricum, and waited for Stilicho's troops to arrive from across the Adriatic. Since it was impossible to mount large-scale campaigns in the Balkans in winter, the assault was presumably planned for the following summer, in 407. However, any plans were wrecked by the speed with which events unfolded in Britain and Gaul. By May/June 407, when a major Balkans campaign might again be contemplated, the Vandals, Alans and Suevi had crossed the Rhine and spread out through Gaul. Even worse, Constantine III was already across the Channel and had rallied to his banner much of the military establishment of Gaul. To move a large portion of the army of Italy across the Adriatic in these circumstances was impossible. Rather than reinforcing Alaric in Epirus, therefore, Stilicho's only move in 407 was to send one of his generals, a Goth by the name of Sarus, to Gaul to try and snuff out Constantine's usurpation before it gathered momentum. The attempt failed.

By the beginning of 408, Stilicho's position was precarious. Constantine and the barbarians were manoeuvring in different parts of Gaul, and that entire province, together with Britain, had fallen out of central control. North Africa and Spain were still on side, but Alaric was getting restive in Epirus. His Goths had now been sitting there for a year, waiting for the legions to arrive, and the Gallic situation was still much too critical for anything to be about to happen. There was also another factor at work. Alaric's hold over his own men was by no means unassailable, and the rank and file had to be kept happy. Was Stilicho really going to deliver on his promises?

By the spring of 408, Alaric was sufficiently concerned to demand reassurance. Reminding Stilicho, not unreasonably, that his forces had as yet received no financial, let alone military, support, he demanded four thousand pounds of gold. Threatening war if they were not paid, they now advanced north and west to the Roman province of Noricum (modern Austria) in the Alpine foothills, conveniently placed for a move into Italy should that prove necessary. This was not the most sympathetic response to Stilicho's predicament from a supposed ally, but Alaric had his own constituencies to satisfy – and Stilicho, remember, hadn't shed a tear when he forced the Goths out of Italy in 401/2. The emperor and the majority of the Senate, we're told, were ready for war with the Goths. But this would have added to the Rhine invaders and Constantine III a third formidable enemy, and Stilicho took a different view. The Senate gathered in Rome for a set-piece debate, and Stilicho argued his case. He got his way, and the Senate approved the payment of gold. Opposition wasn't stilled, however, and a certain Lampadius has gone down in history for his judgement: 'This isn't peace, but a pact of servitude' (*non est ista pax* *sed pactio servitutis*). By this stage, Stilicho had pretty much expended every last piece of his remaining political capital, but fate hadn't yet finished with him.

On 1 May 408, the eastern emperor Arcadius, the western emperor Honorius' elder brother, died, leaving a seven-year-old son, Theodosius II, as his heir. Again, emperor and general disagreed. Stilicho wanted to go to Constantinople to have his say in the arrangement of eastern affairs, but so did Honorius. As over the payment to Alaric, Stilicho got his way, suggesting also that Alaric should in the meantime be sent to Gaul. But the rift between emperor and general was only too apparent, and one high court bureaucrat, Olympius, originally an appointee of Stilicho, laboured to widen it. Stilicho's will had prevailed on every issue, but the western Empire was still in a dreadful state. Constantine III had now taken up residence at Arles in southern Gaul, and was hovering over the passes into Italy. There were barbarians all over Gaul, and Alaric, having received his money, was still sitting in Noricum eyeing the eastern Alpine passes. No wonder, as the sources report, Stilicho spent the summer of 408 formulating plans but not implementing them; the whole imperial edifice was coming down around his ears. At this point, Zosimus records, Olympius played his trump card:[56] 'Stilicho – he said – was planning the journey to the east in order to plot the overthrow of the young Theodosius and the transfer of the east to his own son Eucherius.'

This message was repeated at every opportunity, and carefully disseminated among the Roman troops of the army of Italy, gathered in their main headquarters at Pavia (Ticinum). When Honorius came to review them, before sending them off on 13 August to engage with Constantine III, the troops mutinied and killed many of Stilicho's main supporters in the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. On hearing the news:

> [Stilicho] assembled the leaders of all the barbarian allied troops he had with him, to hold a council about what should be done. Everyone agreed that if the emperor had been killed, which was still in doubt, all the barbarian allies should fall on the Roman soldiers at once and teach all the others a lesson, but that if the emperor were safe, even though the bureaucratic officers had been killed, only the instigators of the mutiny should be punished . . . When, however, they found that no insult had been offered to the emperor, Stilicho decided to proceed no further with punishing the soldiers but to return to Ravenna.

These barbarian troops were mainly the twelve thousand or so followers of the Gothic king Radagaisus, whom Stilicho had drafted after the former's defeat and who formed a distinct grouping within the Italian army. Nothing suggests that there was any kind of Roman/barbarian split in the other, regular regiments, and after Stilicho's fall many non-Romans, individuals recruited over the years, continued to serve in them. In Ravenna, Stilicho first sought sanctuary in a church; but then he surrendered himself to certain death, not allowing his personal retainers to intervene. He was decapitated on 22 August.

So perished, after thirteen years of power, the western generalissimo. Many of his chief appointees had been killed in the mutiny at Pavia, and others were now hunted down and killed. His son Eucherius was arrested and executed, and Honorius divorced his daughter. Regime change Roman-style was – like many politicians – nasty, brutish and thorough. Olympius' last throw against his former mentor took the form of a series of laws enacted between September and November 408, which confiscated all of Stilicho's property and punished anyone who tried to hold on to anything that had once belonged to this 'public brigand'.[57] To my mind, like the Thane of Cawdor, nothing in his life became him like the leaving of it. He preferred to die quietly, rather than convulse what remained of the Roman state in further civil war. What's left to us is the vignette of a loyal state servant of considerable stature; the best of our sources, Olympiodorus, for one, was highly sympathetic towards him. Although one anti-barbarian Greek historian, Eunapius, accuses him of colluding with Alaric from the early 390s onwards, there is not the slightest sign that having a Vandal father made him comport himself as anything other than a loyal Roman officer. Stilicho just had the misfortune to be in authority at the moment when the Huns overturned the balance of power on which the Empire had traditionally rested. There aren't many individuals in history who would have been able to deal successfully, and all at the same moment, with restive emperor, Vandals, Alans and Suevi, large-scale usurpation and Gothic supergroup.[58]

The wisdom behind Stilicho's policies shows up in the events that followed his death. The new regime headed by Olympius, who made himself Master of Offices (*magister officiorum*) – a senior bureaucratic position with wide-ranging responsibilities, not unlike head of the Civil Service – completely reversed Stilicho's policies. War, not peace, with the Goths became the order of the day, and Alaric's offer to exchange hostages, in return for payment and withdrawal from the fringes of Italy, was firmly rejected.

The Goths were now back in the political wilderness, worse off in some ways than before 406. At least then they had had a well established base. Now, they were in an unfamiliar territory and lacking ties to any local food-producing population. But in one important respect, Alaric's Goths were soon to be better off. Shortly after Stilicho's execution, the native Roman element in the army of Italy launched a series of pogroms against the families and property of the barbarian troops that he had recruited, many of them the former followers of Radagaisus. These families, who had been quartered in various Italian cities, were massacred wholesale. Outraged, the menfolk threw in their lot with Alaric, increasing his fighting force to perhaps around 30,000. Nor was this first reinforcement the end of the story. Later, when the Goths were encamped outside Rome in 409, they were joined by enough slaves to take Alaric's force to a total of 40,000 warriors. Again, I suspect that most of these slaves were the less fortunate followers of Radagaisus, rather than ex-Roman pastry-cooks. Just three years after hordes of them had been sold into slavery, Alaric had offered them a means of ending their servitude to the Romans.[59]

In the autumn of 408, now in command of a Gothic supergroup larger than any yet seen, Alaric made a bold play. Gathering all his men, including those stationed in Pannonia with his brother-in-law Athaulf, he marched across the Alps and into Italy, sowing destruction far and wide as he made a beeline for Rome. He arrived outside the city in November and quickly laid siege to it, thus preventing all food supplies from entering. It soon emerged, however, that Alaric had not the slightest intention of capturing the city. What he wanted – and what he got by the end of the year – was, most obviously, booty. The Roman Senate agreed to pay him a ransom of 5,000 pounds of gold and 30,000 of silver, together with huge quantities of silks, skins and spices – particularly handy at this moment when he had a newly recruited army whose loyalty he needed to court. But as he had since 395, the Goth also pressed on with his efforts to find a modus vivendi with the Roman state; and he wanted the Senate's help in achieving this, the main aim of his entire political career. A senatorial embassy duly approached Honorius as mediators, urging the case for a hostage swap and a military alliance. The emperor made assenting noises, so the Goths dropped the siege, withdrawing north into Tuscany.

But Honorius was either playing for time, or else unsure of what to do. Olympius' influence was still strong enough to prevent the agreement being ratified, and so, particularly incensed by the ambush of part of his force near Pisa, Alaric returned to Rome to ram his message home. Under Gothic pressure, another senatorial embassy, this time with an escort of Goths, trotted north to Ravenna – now the political heart of the Empire – where Honorius was based. It was time to talk, they declared. This was enough to destroy Olympius' credibility with the emperor. It simply was not possible to mobilize the Roman army in Italy and attack the Goths – the sides were too evenly matched for victory to be certain, and a head-on Roman–Gothic confrontation would have allowed Constantine III to advance over the Alps. The only alternative was to negotiate. By April 409, the man with most influence over the emperor was a former supporter of Stilicho, Jovius the Praetorian Prefect of Italy – he had previously been sent to liaise with the Goths as they waited in Epirus for the arrival of Stilicho before launching their projected joint campaign against the eastern Empire. Negotiations opened between Alaric and Jovius at Rimini, and the prospects for peace seemed good precisely because the imperial party had few bargaining chips. Constantine III was still in Arles, busy promoting his sons to the purple – a direct threat of impending dynasty change, if ever there was one. Honorius was now so scared of Constantine, indeed, that at some point early in 409, in an act of formal recognition, he sent him a purple robe. An attempt by some of Honorius' officers to infiltrate a garrison of 6,000 men into Rome also ended in disaster, with barely a hundred getting through. Meanwhile, the troops in Ravenna were becoming restive. For Honorius, therefore, fighting just wasn't an option. Alaric knew it, as his first demands reveal. Zosimus tells us:[60] 'Alaric demanded that a fixed amount of gold and corn be provided every year, and that he and all his followers should live in the two Venetias, Noricum and Dalmatia.' Jovius acquiesced, and also requested that Honorius formally appoint Alaric to a senior imperial generalship (*magister utriusque militiae*). The agreement would make the Goths rich and their leader a figure of great influence at court; it would also place a Gothic army astride the major eastern passes into Italy and close to Ravenna.

But there was a sticking-point. Honorius was ready to agree to the requests for corn and gold, but not to the generalship. He responded with an insulting letter that was read out during the negotiations. Alaric stormed out – but then, fascinatingly, changed his mind. This time he recruited some Roman bishops to serve as his ambassadors. The message they delivered was this:

> Alaric did not now want office or honour, nor did he now wish to settle in the provinces previously specified, but only the two Noricums, which are on the far reaches of the Danube, are subject to continual incursions, and pay little tax to the treasury. Moreover he would be satisfied with as much corn each year as the emperor thought sufficient, and forget the gold . . . When Alaric made these fair and prudent proposals, everyone marvelled at the man's moderation.

Gone was the putative Gothic protectorate; gone too were the payments in gold; the Goths would live quietly in a frontier province, well away from Ravenna. Alaric's moderation may astonish, but it reveals his vision of the big picture. Currently he had the military power to take pretty much whatever he wanted, but was willing to trade it in for a stable peace agreement with the Roman state. He must have had a powerful sense of a latent strength that the Empire might at some point reassert, and that demanded a safety-first approach.

Unrest still reigned, however, at Honorius' court. The historian Olympiodorus thought Alaric's revised terms supremely reasonable, but they were again rejected. So Alaric returned to Rome for a third time, set up his second siege, and decided to up the stakes. At the end of 409 he persuaded the Senate to elect its own emperor, Priscus Attalus, and for a time the west had a third Augustus alongside Honorius and Constantine III. From a leading senatorial family, Attalus had been prominent in public life for over a decade. Embassies were now sent to Honorius from the Senate, threatening him with mutilation and exile; Alaric himself – appointed Attalus' general-in-chief – proceeded to subdue most of the cities of northern Italy and to besiege Ravenna; and other forces were despatched to North Africa, which had remained loyal to Honorius. At one point Honorius was ready to flee, but in the nick of time 4,000 troops arrived from the east to make Ravenna safe, and enough money was sent from North Africa to secure the loyalty of the army of Italy. Attalus tried twice, if rather half-heartedly, to take North Africa, but he refused to employ any of Alaric's men. The Gothic leader had had enough. Perhaps his original notion had been to set up his own tame emperor, or perhaps Attalus' promotion had always been a bargaining counter. Be that as it may, in July 410 he deposed Attalus and reopened negotiations with Honorius, who – thanks to the influx of eastern troops and African funds – had recovered his confidence. A meeting was arranged, and Alaric moved to within 60 stadia (about 12 kilometres) of Ravenna. Rogue elements in Honorius' military, meanwhile, were against all negotiation. As Alaric awaited Honorius, he was attacked by a small Roman force led by Sarus. Later, in the mid-410s, Sarus' brother Sergeric was prominent enough among Alaric's Goths to make a bid for its leadership, which, taken with Sarus' documented hostility to Alaric and his brother-in-law Athaulf, suggests to me that he was a rival whom Alaric had defeated for the leadership of the Goths back in the 390s.[61]

Alaric was outraged, both at the attack, and – if I'm right – at the identity of his attacker. Giving up on the idea of negotiating with Ravenna, the Goths turned on their heels and returned to Rome a fourth time. There they mounted their third siege. No doubt by this time Rome's suburban landladies had their old rooms waiting for them. There was a brief halt outside the walls, but then the Salarian Gate opened.[62]

The Sack of Rome

BY ALL ACCOUNTS, there followed one of the most civilized sacks of a city ever witnessed. Alaric's Goths were Christian, and treated many of Rome's holiest places with great respect. The two main basilicas of St Peter and St Paul were nominated places of sanctuary. Those who fled there were left in peace, and refugees to Africa later reported with astonishment how the Goths had even conducted certain holy ladies there, particularly one Marcella, before methodically ransacking their houses. Not that everyone, not even all the city's nuns, fared so well, but the Christian Goths did keep their religious affiliation firmly in view. One huge silver ciborium, 2,025 pounds in weight and the gift of the emperor Constantine, was lifted from the Lateran Palace, but the liturgical vessels of St Peter's were left in situ. Structural damage, too, was largely limited to the area of the Salarian Gate and the old Senate house. All in all, even after three days of Gothic attentions, the vast majority of the city's monuments and buildings remained intact, even if stripped of their movable valuables.

The contrast with the last time the city had been sacked, by Celtic tribes in 390 BC, could not have been more marked. Then, as Livy tells it, the main Roman forces had found themselves tied up in a siege of the Etruscan city of Veii (modern Isola Farnese), so that a Celtic warband was able to walk straight into Rome. The few men of fighting age left there defended the capitol with the help of some geese, which provided early warning of surprise attacks, but they abandoned the rest of the town. Older patricians refused to leave, but sat outside their houses in full ceremonial robes. At first the Celts approached reverentially 'beings who . . . seemed in their majesty of countenance and in the gravity of their expression most like to gods'. Then:

> A Celt stroked the beard of one of them, Marcus Papirius, which he wore long as they all did then, at which point the Roman struck him over the head with his ivory mace, and, provoking his anger, was the first to be slain. After that, the rest were massacred where they sat and . . . there was no mercy then shown to anyone. The houses were ransacked, and after, being emptied, were set aflame.

In 390 BC, only the fortress on the Capitol survived the burning of the city; in AD 410 only the Senate house was set on fire.[63]

That Rome should have seen a highly civilized sack conducted by Christian Goths who respected the sanctity of St Peter's might seem a dreadful anticlimax compared with expectations of bloodthirsty barbarians running loose in the great imperial capital. It's much more exciting to think of the sack of Rome as the culmination of Germanic dreams of revenge – inspired by the slaughter of Varus' legions in AD 9 – against Roman imperialism. The inescapable conclusion to be drawn from a close exploration of the sequence of events between 408 and 410, however, is that Alaric did not want the sack to happen. His Goths had been outside the city on and off since late autumn 408, and, had they wanted to, could have taken it at any point in the twenty months since their arrival. Alaric could probably not have cared less about possible banner headlines in the historical press and a few dozen wagons' worth of booty. His concerns were of a different order altogether. Since 395, he had been struggling to force the Roman state to rewrite its relationship with the Goths as it had been defined in the treaty of 382. His bottom line, as we know, was the grant of recognized status by a legitimate Roman regime. Once he had given up on Constantinople in 400/1, this had to mean the regime of Honorius in Ravenna. Besieging Rome was simply a means of pressuring Honorius and his advisers to come to a deal. But the ploy never worked. Essentially, Alaric overestimated the significance of the city to an imperial authority based in Ravenna. Rome was a potent symbol of Empire, but no longer the political centre of the Roman world. Ultimately, therefore, Honorius could ignore its fate without the Empire suffering major damage. Alaric's letting his troops loose there for three days was an admission that his whole policy, since entering Italy in the autumn of 408, had been misconceived. It had not delivered the kind of deal with the Roman state that he was looking for. The sack of Rome was not so much a symbolic blow to the Roman Empire as an admission of Gothic failure.

But if its immediate importance was not at all what you might expect, Honorius and his advisers had not lightly abandoned Rome to the Goths, and the sack was part of a broad sequence of events of much greater historical significance. Ultimately, the events of late August 410 had their origin in the further advance of the Huns into the heart of Europe and the highly potent combination of invasion and usurpation that consequently convulsed the western Empire. For although the sack was historically insignificant, the events of which it was a part had massive significance for the stability of Roman Europe, their shock waves reverberating around the Roman world. From the Holy Land, as we've seen, Jerome lamented the fall of a city that for him still symbolized everything that was good and worthwhile. Elsewhere, the response was more strident. Educated non-Christians, for instance, argued that there could be no clearer sign of the illegitimacy of the new imperial religion: Rome had been sacked because its guardian gods, now rejected, had removed their protection. In North Africa, this line of thought was championed in particular by some of the upper-class refugees who fled there from Italy. And it was a challenge that St Augustine met with the full force of his intellect.

Many of his sermons can be quite closely dated, and those from the later months of the year 410 show him grappling with a series of related issues. He then took some of the most important of these ideas and put them together – with much else besides – in what became his magnum opus: *The City of God*. This grew into a work of twenty-two books, and was not completed until 425. The first three books, though, were published in 413, and contain Augustine's immediate responses to the questions that the sack had led his congregation to pose, many of them triggered by the taunts of pagan detractors of Christianity.

Augustine's immediate answer was of the straightforward yah-boo-sucks variety. This bunch of vociferous pagans just hadn't read their history. The Roman Empire had endured many a disaster long before Christ had appeared on the earth, without blame having been laid at the door of the divine powers:[64]

> Where were [the gods], when the consul Valerius was slain in defending the Capitol, which had been set on fire by exiles and slaves? ... Where were they when Spurius Maelius, because he distributed free corn to the hungry people as the famine increased in severity, was accused of aiming at kingship and was slain? ... Where were they when a fearful plague had broken out? ... Where were they when the Roman army had for ten years fought without success and without intermission at Veii? ... Where were they when the Gauls captured Rome, sacked it, burned it, and filled it with bodies of the slain?

A quick rereading of Livy's *History of the City of Rome* had furnished Augustine with enough ammunition to make a decent counterblast to the pagans' protests. But, possessed as he was of one of the finest minds in antiquity, he was not content to limit his response to mere on-the-spot retort. In the course of its fifteen-year gestation, *The City of God* would deal with a multitude of issues and themes, but its first three books already set out the central thrust of an entirely alternative view of Roman history from that perpetuated by the ideology of the Empire's one-party state.

Christians had long been familiar with the 'two-city' notion. This developed out of the Book of Revelation's vision of a new Jerusalem coming into being as the eternal dwelling-place of the righteous, after the Last Judgement at the end of the world. This heavenly Jerusalem was where the Christian really belonged, whatever city might claim his or her affiliations in this world. In these early books of *The City of God*, Augustine picked up this well established Christian concept and pursued it, with ruthless intellectual rigour, to some uncomfortable conclusions. Above all, Rome, whatever benefits it had to offer and despite its new Christian manifestation, was just like any other earthly city. Just because Rome's dominion was so wide and had lasted for so many centuries, there was no reason to confuse it with the heavenly Jerusalem. To make his argument stick, Augustine again raided the stock authors of Roman history, and to telling effect. In particular, he argued, the history of Rome, when closely studied, could sustain no claim that the Empire's unmatched success was due to any particular morality, and hence legitimacy, on its part. Borrowing from Sallust, one of the core authors of the Latin curriculum, he was able to claim that any real morality in the ancient Roman state had been attributable to the outside constraints imposed upon it by the war with Carthage, and that, when victory removed this balancing force, corruption set in.[65] The whole Empire was built on nothing more than the desire to dominate: 'This "lust for domination"[66] brings great evils to vex and exhaust the whole human race. Rome was conquered by this lust when [she] triumphed over the conquest of Alba [Rome's first victory], and to the popular acclaim of her crime she gave the name of glory.'

Augustine did not go on to claim that the entire imperial edifice was evil, or that earthly peace was a bad thing. But he urged his readers to understand that the Pax Romana was no more than an opportunity for Christians to come to God in the realization that their real loyalty was to the heavenly kingdom: 'The Heavenly City outshines Rome beyond comparison. There, instead of victory, is truth; instead of high rank, holiness; instead of peace, felicity; instead of life, eternity.' In this world, citizens of the Heavenly City belong to different polities, so that even among the Goths sacking Rome there might be true friends, while some fellow Romans might be enemies.[67] The Heavenly City's citizens can owe no more than a passing loyalty to any earthly entity; they will be united in the next world:

> Christ with divine authority denounces and condemns the offences of men, and their perverted lusts, and he gradually withdraws his family from all parts of a world which is failing and declining through those evils, so that he may establish a city whose titles of 'eternal' and 'glorious' are not given by meaningless flattery but by the judgement of truth.

In the sack of Rome, Augustine found the fundamental illegitimacy of all earthly cities, and raised a rallying cry to the citizens of the heavenly Jerusalem to look to the life to come.[68]

Sixteen hundred years on, it is easy to miss the revolutionary nature of Augustine's vision. Claims that the Roman Empire would last for ever – the image of *Roma aeterna* – have been shown to be hollow; the notion that its success was based upon a unique access to divine favour strikes us as ridiculous. In reading *The City of God*, however, we must forget all that we know from hindsight. When Augustine was writing, the Empire had lasted for centuries and had no serious rival. For as long as anyone could remember, its propaganda had been portraying it as the gods', now God's – the transition to Christianity had been surprisingly smooth – vehicle for civilizing humanity. Christian Bishops had been happy to propagate the idea that it was no accident that Christ and Augustus had lived at exactly the same moment. What better indicator that the Roman Empire was destined to conquer the world and bring the whole of humankind to Christianity? Everything from the emperor's bedchamber to his treasury was sacred, and the intensely orchestrated ceremonial life of the state was devoted to the idea that God ruled humanity through a divinely guided emperor.

Augustine's response to the sack of Rome put a huge black cross next to all of these comfortable ideas. The Empire was but one state among many in the course of world history; it was neither uniquely virtuous nor uniquely predestined to last.

The sequence of events surrounding the sack of Rome, and the response to its fall, offer us two contrasting interpretations, then, of the significance of those three days in August 410. On the one hand, both Jerome and Augustine in their different ways bear eloquent witness to a world turned upside down. On the other, we see that the city was sacked for the very prosaic reason that Alaric needed to compensate his followers for their loyalty, after his broader plans for Gothic prosperity had been thwarted. In *The City of God* Augustine was much too canny to commit himself on the point of whether the sack of the city, after the Goths' Roman holiday, meant the end of the Empire. This warns us not to jump to any conclusions without taking a much closer look at the Empire's strategic position.

Homecoming

IN OCTOBER AND November 417, Rutilius Claudius Namatianus made his way slowly back to Gaul. A native of Toulouse, he had been in Italy for several years: in 412 as Master of Offices at Honorius' court – the same position that had allowed Olympius to undermine Stilicho – then, briefly, as Urban Prefect of Rome in the summer of 414. On his return to Gaul he wrote an epic poem, *De Reditu Suo* (*On His Homecoming*), describing his journey. The first book comprised 644 lines of poetry, but the manuscripts break off after just sixty-eight lines of the second, at which point Rutilius was still only somewhere off the coast of north-west Italy. Although one more page – another forty-odd lines – turned up in the late 1960s (having been used to patch up a volume in the monastery of Bobbio in the sixteenth century), we are still not sure where exactly in Gaul the journey ended.[69] It was a sea voyage:

> For since the Tuscan fields, the Aurelian road,
> Have suffered Gothic raids with sword and fire,
> Since woods have lost their homes, their bridges streams,
> Better to trust with sails the uncertain sea.

The system of stables and guesthouses on the Via Aurelia, the main highway up the west coast of Italy, which had facilitated the comings and goings of official travellers such as Theophanes (see Chapter 2), had not been restored since the Goths occupied the region during 408–10. But Rutilius was far from downhearted. The poem opens with an evocation of the attractions of life in Rome undiminished by the sack:

> What tedium can there be though men devote
> The years of all their mortal life to Rome?
> Naught tedious is that which pleases without end.
> O, ten times happy – past all reckoning –
> Those whose desert it was to have been born
> On that propitious soil; the noble sons
> Of Roman chiefs, they crown their lofty birth
> With the proud name of citizens of Rome.

Nor has the sack raised in Rutilius' mind the slightest doubt about the Empire's destiny, its mission to civilize humankind:

> Thy gifts thou spreadest wide as the sun's rays,
> As far as earth-encircling ocean heaves.
> Phoebus,[70] embracing all things [,] rolls for thee;
> His steeds both rise and sink in thy domains . . .
> Far as the habitable climes extend
> Towards either pole thy valour finds its path.
> Thou hast made of alien realms one fatherland;
> The lawless found their gain beneath thy sway;
> Sharing thy laws with them thou hast subdued,
> Thou hast made a city of the once wide world.

Here are all the old ideas we met with at the height of imperial grandeur.

The poem is extraordinary. Here is Rutilius returning to Gaul a decade after the Vandals, Alans and Suevi had turned it into a single funeral pyre, and dwelling at length on the glories of Rome just seven years after the sack. But, having held high office at the court of the embattled Honorius, he could see as well as anyone the size of the task ahead. He returned to Gaul ready to roll up his sleeves:

> . . . the Gallic fields demand again
> Their countryman. Too sadly marred those fields
> By tedious wars; but the less fair they are
> The more to be compassioned. Lighter fault
> To slight one's countrymen in prosperous hours;
> The public loss claims each man's loyalty.

His faith in the Roman ideal rested on a determination to rebuild what the barbarians had laid waste, not a delusion that the history of the last decade hadn't happened:

> Let thy [Rome's] dire woe be blotted and forgot;
> Let thy contempt for suffering heal thy wounds . . .
> Things that refuse to sink, still stronger rise,
> And higher from the lowest depths rebound;
> And, as the torch reversed new strength attains,
> Thou, brighter from thy fall, to heaven aspirest!

Rome had taken much harder knocks from Carthage and the Celts. She would rise phoenix-like, strengthened and renewed by suffering.

Nor was Rutilius the only Gallo-Roman brimming with confidence in 417. His was a pagan take on history and fate, but his vision spanned the religious divide. The same year, in his *Carmen de Providentia Dei* (*Poem on the Providence of God*), a Gallic Christian poet reflected on the disasters that had afflicted Gaul in the last decade. This anonymous author stands in the same tradition as the Gallic poets we encountered earlier, and echoes many of the same themes. The passage of those few years, however, had given him a slightly different perspective:

> You, who weep over overgrown fields, deserted courtyards and the crumbling terraces of your burnt out villa, shouldn't you rather shed tears for your own losses, when you look at the desolate recesses of your heart, the beauty covered over with layers of grime, and the enemy rioting in the citadel of your imprisoned mind? If that citadel hadn't been surrendered . . . these beauties created by the hand would still remain to bear witness to the virtue of a holy people.

The message here is much more Old Testament: God's people were visited with destruction because they fell from righteousness. But this is a message with a flip side: 'If any mental energy remains, let us shake off the servile yoke of sin, break the chains, and return to freedom and the glory of our native land.' He closed with a call to arms: 'Let us not fear, because we have collapsed in flight in a first contest, to take a stand and embark on a second battle.'

The poet meant his message to be taken spiritually, but was also aware of its political dimension. Spiritual renewal would bring victory and prosperity on earth as well as in heaven. Worldly disaster wasn't a reminder of the essential division that must exist between the Heavenly City and any earthly state, but a call for moral reform. There is no rejection here of the Empire and its civilizing mission. The barbarians had done their worst, but this was only round one; round two would see the Empire triumph.[71] In this respect, Gallo-Roman pagans and Gallo-Roman Christians were of one mind. The message could not be more different from Augustine's.

Flavius Constantius

THE SOURCE OF this renewed confidence was an extraordinary change that had come over the western Empire in the ten years since Rome had been sacked. When we left the story at the end of August 410, prospects could hardly have looked worse. There was a Roman army in Italy, unable to move against Alaric's Goths for fear of leaving the back door open for Constantine III, still angling to overthrow Honorius. The Vandals, Alans and Suevi had turned their attention to Spain, and were on the point of dividing its territories between them. Constantine controlled not only the British provinces but the Gallic military too, and was pushing feelers into Spain and Italy. Control of the western state had thus fragmented into the hands of two bunches of barbarians and an unusually successful usurper. Now, seven years later, much of the imperial jigsaw had been put back together, and things were looking rosy again.

The chief architect of all this was an experienced military commander by the name of Flavius Constantius.[72] An Illyrian from Naissus (modern Niš) in the Balkans, the heart of one of Rome's recruiting grounds, he had originally joined the east Roman army and served in many of the campaigns of Theodosius I. He had presumably, like Stilicho, first come west in the campaign against the usurper Eugenius, probably when in his mid-thirties, and, again like Stilicho, had stayed on afterwards. As we shall see, there are good reasons for taking him to have been a supporter of the old generalissimo, although he was not senior enough to find any mention in the sources while Stilicho was alive.

> In public processions Constantius was downcast and sullen, a man with bulging eyes, a long neck and a broad head, who always slumped over the neck of the horse he was riding, darting glances here and there out of the corners of his eyes . . . But at banquets and parties he was so cheerful and affable that he even competed with the clowns who often played before his table.[73]

Hardly your charismatic hero, then. But his affability on more private occasions, Olympiodorus tells us, was a huge asset, and there is no doubting the energy with which he set about rebuilding the western Empire.

Flavius Constantius inherited Stilicho's position as senior western general (*magister militum*) in 410/11. His closeness to Stilicho is suggested by the fact that he took a leading role in the retribution dished out to the chief protagonist in the plot against him. Olympius met his grisly end – he was clubbed to death – at pretty much this time. With matters at court sorted out to his satisfaction, Flavius Constantius swiftly turned to more substantial problems. Having mobilized the Italian army for war, his first target was Constantine III.

By this stage, affairs in Gaul had taken an interesting turn, which aided our man in his endeavours. Constantine had fallen out with one of his generals, Gerontius, who had gone so far as to raise his own usurper, Maximus,[74] to the purple and advance on Constantine's headquarters at Arles. When Constantius' Italian army reached that city, therefore, it had first to defeat the forces of Gerontius. This was duly accomplished – it was enough to turn Gerontius' remaining troops against him, and he committed suicide. The next challenge came in the form of a relief force raised by Constantine's other leading general, Edobichus, who had recruited auxiliaries from the Franks and Alamanni to fight alongside whatever troops from the Roman army of Gaul remained under his command. Again, Constantius triumphed. To induce surrender, Constantine III was offered his life, but the promise was broken. On his way back to Honorius he was murdered, and on 18 September 411 it was only his head that arrived at Ravenna – at the top of a pole. One season's campaigning had been enough to wrap up a usurper who, only two years before, had had Honorius fearing for his life.

This wasn't quite the end of the usurper problem, though. In Roman politics, one usurpation tended to beget another, especially when the first had started to wobble. A mixture of ambition and fear of retribution prompted individuals who had taken part in the first revolt to try their hand at a second. In 411, it was not only Gerontius who smelt Constantine's blood in the water, but so did a Gallic aristocrat by the name of Jovinus. His centre of operations was further north. Proclaimed emperor perhaps at Mainz in the province of Upper Germania, his military power-base was provided by still dissident elements among the Gallo-Roman military, backed up by Burgundians and Alans.[75] He also gained the considerable fillip of support from Alaric's Goths, who were now in Gaul under the leadership of his brother-in-law Athaulf. This was a powerful combination, but an artificial one, and Constantius took time to consider the situation. Instead of rushing into battle, he used his diplomatic skills to work on the cracks in Jovinus' putative alliance and in 413 received his due reward. The Goths changed sides, and – a clear demonstration of the power of the supergroup Alaric had assembled – this left the usurper with no choice but to surrender. Executed en route to Honorius, he met the same fate as Constantine. His head duly arrived atop its pole on 30 August that year.

Concentrating so determinedly on defeating the usurpers before tackling the barbarians might seem the wrong order of priorities, and historians have often criticized it. But to combat the grave threats now facing the Empire, any leader needed to be able to deploy the full range of imperial resources: particularly, of course, on the military front. In the summer of 413, Constantius' defeat of the usurpers finally reunited, for the first time since the autumn of 406, the major armies of the western Empire, the different British, Gallic and Spanish elements of which had been won over by Constantine III, Gerontius and Jovinus. Having put the Roman house in order, and united the once disparate parts of the army under his command, Constantius was now ready to deal with the other problems. Very sensibly, before turning them loose on the various barbarian groups at large in the western Empire, he promised a pay rise to the troops who had only yesterday been fighting for the enemy.[76] Within the different regiments of Constantius' army were many individually recruited barbarians who were quite happy fighting under Roman colours. Individual barbarians were one thing, though; masses of independent Goths, Vandals, Alans and Suevi, quite another. This newly reunited army's first task was to bring the Goths to heel.

Athaulf's Goths

In the immediate aftermath of the sack, the Goths headed south. Now that his attempt to stabilize their position within the Empire had failed, Alaric had in mind a complete change of strategy: he was now looking to relocate, lock, stock and both smoking barrels, in North Africa. But a well timed storm wrecked the fleet he was assembling, and he died shortly afterwards. In the course of 411 Athaulf moved the Goths into Gaul, where we saw him first supporting, then abandoning, the usurper of Jovinus.

A mutually acceptable blueprint for Gotho-Roman relations was yet to be established. We know there was some fighting between the Goths and Constantius' forces around Marseille in late 413, and that the Goths afterwards established themselves at Narbonne. Here, as so often in this story, the loss of Olympiodorus' history is a considerable handicap, but everything suggests that Athaulf was continuing to demand a much higher price for an agreement than Constantius was willing to pay. The historian Orosius reports overhearing someone telling St Jerome that:

> He himself had been a very intimate friend of Athaulf at Narbonne, and . . . he had often heard what the latter, when in good spirits, health and temper [meaning after a few drinks], was accustomed to answer in reply to questions. It seems that at first he ardently desired to blot out the Roman name and make all the Roman territory a Gothic empire in fact as well as in name, so that, to use the popular expression, Gothia should take the place of Romania, and he, Athaulf, should become all that Caesar Augustus once had been. Having discovered from long experience that the Goths, because of their unbridled barbarism, were utterly incapable of obeying laws, and yet believing that the state ought not to be deprived of laws without which a state is not a state, he [Athaulf] chose to seek for himself at least the glory of restoring and increasing the renown of the Romans by the power of the Goths, wishing to be looked upon by posterity as the restorer of the Roman Empire.[77]

What precisely Athaulf meant by this emerges from his actions. In the train of booty that the Goths took from Rome were two human prizes: Priscus Attalus, whom Alaric had persuaded the Senate of Rome to raise to the purple and who had then been demoted again in 409/10; and the emperor Honorius' sister, Galla Placidia. In 414, after bringing down Jovinus, Athaulf proceeded to make strategic use of both of his hostages. Having been unceremoniously dumped by Alaric as part of a putative settlement with Honorius, Attalus was restored to the purple. It was then Placidia's turn to be exploited, in another effort at blackmail on Athaulf's part. In January 414, Olympiodorus tells us, the two were married,

> with the advice and encouragement of Candidianus . . . at the house of Ingenuus, one of the leading citizens of [Narbonne]. There Placidia, dressed in royal raiment, sat in a hall decorated in the Roman manner, and by her side sat Athaulf, wearing a Roman general's cloak and other Roman clothing . . . Along with other wedding gifts, Athaulf gave Placidia fifty handsome young men dressed in silk clothes, each bearing aloft two very large dishes, one full of gold, the other full of precious . . . stones, which had been carried off by the Goths at the sack of Rome. Then nuptial hymns were sung, first by Attalus, then by Rusticius and Phoebadius.[78]

Clearly, Athaulf was pursuing here the more ambitious of Alaric's two peace plans – the one that included, for himself, a glittering career at the imperial court. Placidia duly fell pregnant and gave birth to a son, whom his proud parents named Theodosius. A momentous name-giving, indeed: the young Theodosius was grandson of one Roman emperor by that name, Theodosius I, and first cousin to another, the eastern emperor Theodosius II, son of Honorius' late brother Arcadius. When you also recall that Honorius had no children at this point, and in fact never did, this was a birth redolent with potential. A king of the Goths had fathered a child with an extremely good claim to be heir apparent to the western Empire.

But Athaulf had, in fact, overreached himself. Constantius and Honorius wanted Placidia back, but minus her Gothic husband. They refused to make a deal on Athaulf's terms. The Goths, anyway, had one huge strategic weakness. Since 408, when they moved on Italy, they had been operating without secure sources of supply. During the glory years culminating in the sack of Rome they had taken booty aplenty; now, with typical precision, Constantius identified their Achilles' heel. Rather than risking his army in battle, he blockaded the Goths by both land and sea. By early 415, food had run out in Narbonne and they had to retreat into Spain in search of supplies. Constantius' strategy was also materially aided by one of those stray accidents of history: the young Theodosius died soon after birth and was buried by his grieving parents in a silver coffin in a church at Barcelona. This took one of the trump cards out of Athaulf's hand. Constantius maintained the pressure, and in due course the Goths – or some of them – cracked. What was really standing in the way of a

settlement – obviously in the air since Athaulf abandoned Jovinus in 413 – was Athaulf's determination to become an imperial bigwig. In the summer of 415, enough resentment built up against his policies, and their cost to the Goths in general, to prompt an internal coup, during which Athaulf was mortally wounded. After his death (announced in Constantinople on 24 September), his brother and the children of his first marriage were all butchered by Sergeric, who belonged to a noble Gothic house that had earlier competed for the leadership of the Goths formerly united by Alaric. But after only seven days Sergeric too was ousted, and power passed to a certain Wallia. Neither of these successors was a blood relation of Alaric and Athaulf. Wallia gave in to Roman pressure, and returned Placidia, now widowed and childless. In return, Constantius handed over to the Goths six hundred thousand *modii* of wheat. The first two steps towards a different kind of peace deal had been taken – one that envisaged a much less important political role in the Empire for the Gothic leadership.[79]

A Phoenix Rising?

THE THIRD STEP, as well as cementing peace with the Goths, would deal with the burning issue that was Spain. For half a decade now, the Vandals, Alans and Suevi had been enjoying the revenues of the Spanish provinces that they had allotted themselves back in 411. But now a Gotho-Roman military alliance was about to take them on. In 416, operations began. Hydatius, in his *Chronicle*, tells us what happened:

> All of the Siling Vandals in Baetica were wiped out by King Wallia. The Alans, who were ruling over the Vandals and Sueves [Suevi], suffered such heavy losses at the hands of the Goths that, after the death of their king, Addax, the few survivors, with no thought for their own kingdom, placed themselves under the protection of Gunderic, the king of the [Hasding] Vandals, who had settled in Gallaecia.[80]

A succinct summary of three years' fighting (416–18) – its import could not be clearer. Having suppressed usurpers and subdued the Goths, Constantius now made use of these very people to tackle his other major problem. And how effective the campaigning was! The Silings ceased to exist, and the Alans – who, according to Hydatius, had previously been the dominant force among the Rhine invaders (a report in tune with their rescue of the Vandals from the hands of the Franks back in the autumn of 406) – suffered such heavy losses that the remnants attached themselves to the Hasding monarchy.

At this point Constantius recalled the Goths from Spain, and in 418 proceeded to settle them in Aquitaine, allotting them lands in the Garonne valley (south-west Gaul) between Toulouse and Bordeaux. Quantities of ink have been expended on the nature and purpose of this settlement. The one piece of hard information we have, which derives from Olympiodorus,[81] is that the Goths were given 'lands to farm'. I am happy to accept this. Certainly, there is no sign in subsequent years that the Roman state was directly supporting the Goths through its tax revenues; and, in fact, the previous decade had shown exactly how vulnerable, in strategic terms, they actually were without their own sources of supply. Athaulf's lofty ambitions had been brought low precisely because Constantius had been able to starve the Goths into insurrection against their own king. Handing them productive lands – much as under the 382 peace settlement – would have been an attractive option for both parties.

As to what happened on the ground, we can only guess. Much has been made of the fact that we hear of no complaints from dispossessed Roman landowners. One possible reason for this may be that it was public land (both imperial estates and lands belonging to public corporations such as city endowments) that was used for the Goths – hence no need for expropriation. As we shall see in the next chapter, this is the way the Roman state dealt with an analogous problem in North Africa. It is highly likely, too, that in many cases the peasants were left in situ, the Goths replacing existing landholders as recipients of rents. Whether this transfer endowed incoming Goths with full ownership rights – the right to sell on or bequeath an allotted piece of land – or only usufruct – the right to enjoy its revenues during one's lifetime – is a question we cannot answer.[82]

As to why Aquitaine was chosen, many different views have been aired: everything from the Goths' potential usefulness in dealing with separatists in north-western Gaul to countering the raids of Saxon pirates.[83] To my mind, Aquitaine was the logical intersection of two imperatives. First, the Goths needed to be put *somewhere*, and the key issue was how far the settlement area was going to be from the west's political centre. As we have seen, Alaric at the height of his power talked of settling them in and around Ravenna and either side of the Alpine passes. There they would have been in a position to intervene constantly at the imperial court. In his more realistic phase he was ready to surrender that vision – entirely unacceptable to the Romans – for some land 'near the frontier'. The Garonne valley, beside the Atlantic Ocean and 1,000 kilometres from Ravenna, fitted that bill perfectly. It also had the second virtue of putting them near routes through the Pyrenees into Spain. And the job in Spain, though well begun, was only half done. Some of the survivors of the Rhine invasion remained unsubdued, and by the early 420s the Goths were back in the peninsula operating jointly again with a Roman army against the Hasding Vandals. In my view, the land settlement was envisaged as no more than one stage in an ongoing process designed to resume with the Goths returning to Spain to finish off the Vandals, Alans and Suevi.

The scale of Constantius' achievement is breathtaking. Despite the fact that, in 410, the Goths were rampaging around Italy, Constantine III was in Arles threatening a total takeover of the west, and the Rhine invaders were dividing up Spain between themselves, enough of the major levers of power had remained intact for a leader of Constantius' ability to put things back together. The armies of Gaul and, especially, Italy – the force with which Stilicho had defeated Radagaisus – still constituted a formidable fighting machine, and the great revenue-producing reservoir of North Africa remained untouched. Between 408 and 410, successive chief ministers had been unable to use the Italian army against either the Goths or Constantine III, because it couldn't fight both enemies at once, and fighting one would have just left the door open for the other. The stalemate was broken, however, by the Goths' departure from Italy under Athaulf. The central authorities in Ravenna had hung on just long enough for the Goths to be starved into leaving, and this had handed freedom of manoeuvre back to Constantius. One, maybe two, outside sources of support also strengthened his hand. First, the eastern Empire sent considerable help to Honorius when Alaric was ravaging Italy in 410, and other moral and financial aid surely followed, even if our sources are too thin to report it.[84]

Paradoxically, given that they had caused the whole mess in the first place, Constantius may also have drawn upon Hunnic support. In

409, Honorius summoned 10,000 Hunnic auxiliaries to his assistance. Since they did not arrive in time to prevent the sack of Rome, some modern historians have concluded that they never appeared.[85] Whether they did or not, in the campaigning season of 411 Constantius, as we have seen, suddenly arose from his military paralysis and marched confidently into Gaul to overpower the usurpers. In part, this reflected his new-found freedom to deploy the powerful army of Italy, but an additional factor may have been the arrival, finally, of the Huns. Getting rid of the Goths from Italian soil, plus a little help from friends old and new, had been enough to tip the balance of power in Constantius' favour. No wonder, in 417, Rutilius and his anonymous Christian counterpart were facing the future with confidence.

It is important to examine more closely, however, Constantius' work of reconstruction. The western Empire, despite his many achievements, had not been returned to exactly pristine condition.

The Reckoning

In one obvious sense, reconstruction wasn't complete in 418, nor would Constantius have claimed that it was. The Silings and Alans had been put through the mincer, but the Hasding Vandals, now reinforced, and the Suevi were still at large. Apart from the potential military dangers these groups posed, their continued presence also meant that the parts of Spain they occupied remained outside direct imperial control, and hence no longer contributed revenues to the state. In fact, the period 405–18 had seen a series of tax losses that Constantius had not yet been able to remedy. It's hard to believe, for instance, that the Garonne valley produced much tax revenue after the Goths were settled there in 418.[86]

It is extremely difficult to reconstruct events in Roman Britain during the 410s, or even the general status of the island, but what is clear is that it had fallen outside the imperial system. As we have seen, the usurpations of 406/7 began there, and the British provinces provided Constantine III with his first power-base. Then, from the moment he moved to the continent with – it has long been suspected – most of the island's remaining Roman military, Britain disappears from our sources, except for two brief notices in Zosimus. The first records that the British threw off Roman rule at a later point in Constantine's usurpation but before the sack of Rome, 'expelling the Roman magistrates and establishing the government they wanted'.[87] The second states that Honorius, still before August 410, wrote to the cities of Britain 'urging them to fend for themselves'. What this means has been much argued about. Zosimus sees this further British revolt as a parting of the ways with Romanness and a return to native custom. I suspect that this is another of his sixth-century misunderstandings, and that in fact the British Romans, unhappy with Constantine's focus on Gaul and consequent inability to defend them, took matters into their own hands. Otherwise, it is hard to see why Honorius would have to write to them in 410 admitting that the state could not provide for their defence. It wasn't so much a question, then, of getting out the woad and relearning Celtic languages as of trying to defend themselves against seaborne attack, especially at the hands of Saxon pirates. This had been a problem for well over a hundred years, and had led the Roman state to construct a range of fortifications, some of which still stand today. The extent of Saxon inroads made between 410 and 420 is another hotly contested issue. Everything suggests that the real cataclysm came a bit later, but, for present purposes, the date doesn't really matter. Whether at the hands of Saxons or of local self-defence forces, Britain dropped out of the Roman radar from about 410, and was no longer supplying revenues to Ravenna.[88]

The same thing was happening at this time in Armorica (northwestern Gaul). The chain of events here is harder to read, but Rutilius tells us that in 417, as he himself was journeying home, his relative Exuperantius was busy restoring order.[89] It would seem, then, that Constantius' regime hastened to reinstitute imperial order and imperial taxation in Armorica, if not in Britain. This was certainly the case in central and southern Gaul, most of which had probably paid its taxes to Constantine III throughout his usurpation. About the Rhine frontier area we have no firm information. The city of Trier lost its role as an administrative centre for the whole of Gaul at this time, when government was moved south to Arles instead. But there was no major break in Roman control of the Trier region, so that it too presumably continued to pay at least some tax to Ravenna.[90]

In addition to the territories lost outright to the Roman system, tax revenue was substantially down in those much larger parts of the west that had been affected by warfare or looting over the past decade. Much of Italy had been pillaged by the Goths, Spain by the survivors of the Rhine invasion, and Gaul by both. How much of these territories had been damaged is difficult to say, and agriculture could of course recover, but there is good evidence that warfare had caused serious medium-term damage. In 412, a law of the emperor Honorius instructed the Praetorian Prefect of Italy that for five years the provinces of Campania, Tuscany, Picenum, Samnium, Apulia, Calabria, Bruttium and Lucania should have their taxes reduced to one-fifth of their normal amount. The Roman state reckoned that these provinces merited such a reduction because it was from their lands that the Goths had mainly supported themselves when camping around Rome between 408 and 410. A second law, of 418, reduced Campania's assessment to one-ninth of its previous level, and that of the other provinces to one-seventh. Few other areas will have taken such sustained damage – the product of a two-year occupation, more or less. The Vandals, Alans and Suevi seem to have come to a more ordered arrangement with the local Hispano-Romans. Nonetheless, outright losses of tax base and damage to what remained must have substantially reduced the annual income of the western Empire between 405 and 418.[91]

We can also detect substantial damage to two other key pillars of state. Evidence of the first shows up in another of the extraordinary sources to survive from late antiquity (mentioned earlier), the *Notitia Dignitatum*. This is a listing of all the civilian and military officials of the later Roman Empire, divided into its eastern and western halves. The document was kept by one of the senior bureaucrats, the *primicerius notariorum* (Chief Notary), part of whose job it was to issue letters of appointment. As the bureaucratic or military structure of the Empire changed, so the document was amended. The eastern half of the text records the eastern Empire as it stood about 395, at or near the death of Theodosius I. The western half, on the other hand, was kept thoroughly up to date down to 408, then partially so down to the early 420s. In particular – and this is why it concerns us here – the *Notitia* contains two listings of the mobile field army units (the *comitatenses*) of the western Empire. The first names the regiments (*numeri*) under their overall commanders, the Masters of Infantry and Cavalry; the second (*distributio numerorum*) records their regional distribution.[92] Detailed analysis indicates that this second list gives us a snapshot of the western field armies as they stood at the end of the second decade of the fifth century.[93]

A close look at these lists, and a comparison with the eastern army lists of 395, is very revealing. First, and entirely unsurprisingly, it is clear that the western army suffered heavy losses in the wars of the early fifth century. The total number of eastern field army regiments in 395 was 157. About 420, the western army had 181, but of these as many as 97 had been raised since 395 and only 84 survived from the period before 395. During the fourth century, the field army units had been split between different emperors on a number of occasions, but everything suggests that they were of roughly the same order of magnitude in each half of the Empire. If, like the east, therefore, the western field army had numbered about 160 regiments in 395, then no fewer than 76 of them (47.5 per cent) had been destroyed in the twenty-five years between Honorius' accession and 420. This is a massive level of attrition, representing losses of upwards of 30,000 men.[94] The Roman army of the Rhine took the heaviest hit. In 420, it stood at 58 regiments; but of these only 21 were pre-395 units, the other 37 (or 64 per cent) having been created during the reign of Honorius. This makes perfect sense. The Gallic army had borne the brunt of the first Rhine crossing; then, under the control of Constantine III, it had continued the fight against the invaders down to the Pyrenees and beyond. It had also, subsequently, been caught on the wrong side of Constantius' counterattack. No wonder it emerged in tatters, with many of its old units shredded and disbanded.[95]

What the *Notitia* has to tell us about how the losses were made good is also extremely interesting. By about 420, the numbers of western comitatensian units had recovered substantially, thanks to the 97 new regiments created since 395. Indeed, if we are right in supposing that eastern and western field armies were roughly equal in size in 395, then its total establishment had even gone up by about 20 units (12.5 per cent). Of the 97 new units, however, 62 (64 per cent) were old frontier garrison regiments regraded to fill out field army numbers. Many of them still appear in their garrison positions in parts of the *Notitia* that had not been updated, and hence are easy to spot. All 28 of the *legiones pseudocomitatenses* were regraded garrison troops, as were another 14 of the supposedly more elite *legiones comitatenses*, and the same is true of another 20 cavalry units in North Africa and Tingitana. Apart from the North African force, Gaul again shows the most disruption. Twenty-one of the 58 regiments of the Gallic field army in 420 were regraded garrison troops. Most of the holes in the western field army created by sustained warfare from about 405 onwards had been filled not by recruiting new top-class forces, therefore, but by reclassifying old, lower-grade ones. And of the 35 new top-class units, about a third have regimental names (Attecotti, Marcomanni, Brisigavi and so on) that derive from the names of non-Roman tribal groupings and suggest that, originally at least, they were composed of non-Roman manpower.[96]

From the superficially dry-as-dust *Notitia Dignitatum* a fascinating picture emerges. On the face of it, the western field army was a larger force than it had been twenty-five years before. The increase in size, however, masks some fundamental problems, not the least of which was that half of its old regiments had been shredded in the intervening warfare. So while the field army was larger, the total military establishment was smaller, since there is no reason to suppose that the regraded garrison troops had been replaced by new forces on the frontier. Constantius achieved great things with this force between 411 and 420, but we can only conclude that, compared with its predecessor of 395, it was a sadly diminished one. An army thrives on continuity, and losses on this scale would have considerably reduced the overall efficiency of the entire western military establishment, and particularly its Gallic arm. Discounting the regraded garrison troops, 'real' comitatensian numbers had shrunk by about 25 per cent between 395 and 420 (about 160 units to 120). And here, I would suggest, we can see the financial losses of the period really beginning to bite. In 420, Constantius faced more, and more urgent, military problems than Stilicho had done in 395. Ideally, he could have used a larger army, but the financial constraints imposed by diminished revenues would not allow it.

Behind the façade of Constantius' very real successes, then, the longer-term effects of the crisis that toppled Stilicho can be clearly distinguished. And if a substantially reduced military force were not bad enough, one further problem had begun to emerge. We first get some inkling of it in Alaric's sieges of Rome, when he was able to extract a measure of cooperation from the Senate in his designs – a generalship for himself, gold for his supporters, greater political influence for the Goths overall – even though this was against the direct wishes of Honorius and the central authorities. Attalus was content to have himself made emperor by the Goths, although he drew the line at allowing Gothic troops to win over Africa to his cause – which really would have cut the last bit of ground from beneath an independent western Empire. The same phenomenon reappeared in Gaul after 414. When Athaulf, this time, restored Attalus to the purple, some of the Gallic landowning aristocracy were ready to rally to his support. The account of Athaulf's wedding is significant not only for where it took place, but also for the number of Gallic aristocrats willing to sing at it and to get into bed with the Gothic-based regime. Paulinus of Pella, who accepted the office of Count of the Sacred Largesse under Attalus, later put it on record that he had done so not because he had any real belief in the legitimacy or viability of the regime, but because it seemed the best path to peace.[97] This was probably the motivation of many of the senators who had cooperated with Alaric, but it was no less dangerous for that.

What we're seeing here is an early instance of the way in which outside military forces could open up pre-existing fault lines within the Roman political system. In the Hadrianople campaign (see Chapter 4), and again in the Rhine crossing at the end of 406, the Empire's lower social orders had been willing to help or even join in with the barbarian invaders. This is not so surprising, given how little such groups had invested in a system run by and for the landowning classes, as we saw in Chapter 3. The willingness of the landowning elite to do deals with barbarians was a very different phenomenon – and much more dangerous for the Empire – but it too had its origins in the nature of the system. Given its vast size and limited bureaucratic technology, the Roman Empire could not but be a world of self-governing localities held together by a mixture of force and the political bargain that paying tax to the centre would bring protection to local landowning elites. The appearance of armed outside forces in the heart of the Roman world put that bargain under great strain. The speed with which some landowners rushed to support barbarian-sponsored regimes is not, as has sometimes been argued, a sign of lack of moral fibre among late Romans, so much as an indicator of the peculiar character of wealth when it comes in the form of land. In historical analysis, not to mention old wills, landed wealth is usually categorized in opposition to moveable goods, and that captures the essence of the problem. You cannot simply pick it up and move, as you would a sack of gold or diamonds, should conditions in your area change. If you do move on, you leave the source of your wealth, and all of your elite status, behind. Landowners have little choice, therefore, but to try to come to terms with changing conditions, and this is what was beginning to happen around Rome in 408/10 and in southern Gaul in 414/15. In fact, it didn't get far, because Constantius reasserted central authority pretty quickly. He also seems to have been aware of the political problem, and acted swiftly to contain it.

In 418, to cap his other efforts at restoration, Constantius reconstituted an annual council of the Gallic provinces, to meet at Arles. Not only the provinces, but also individual cities in the regions close to Arles, were to send delegates selected from their upper classes to discuss matters of public and private concern, especially those pertaining to the interests of landowners (Latin, *possessores*). The timing is suggestively coincidental with the settlement of the Goths in the Garonne valley, and it is a fair bet that this was the main item on the agenda for the first year's meeting. The council was clearly designed – and did indeed function – as a forum at which local rich landowners, who would have the ear of their gentry neighbours as well, could talk regularly to imperial officials. It was a conscious effort to mend the tears, or perhaps just the frayed edges, that had shown up in relations between Gallic aristocrats and the imperial centre in the decade or so after 405. The appearance of outsiders had opened up a gap between the interests of landowners and those of the central administration, which it was the job of the council to close. And there was another coincidence, in the form of the arrival at Arles of Rutilius Namatianus (see p. 233), whose slow homeward journey in the autumn and winter of 417/18 was perfectly timed to bring him to Gaul for the council's first meeting. Well enough connected at Honorius' court to know what was in the wind, he was exactly the kind of ex-office-holder whose presence was required there. Perhaps the assembled bigwigs were treated over dinner to a stirring rendition by this Honorian loyalist of his poem anticipating the ascent from the ashes of Rome and Gaul. Sentiments in no way inappropriate: with the west rid of usurpers, the Goths quieted, the landowners of Gaul recalled into the imperial orbit, and half of the survivors of the Rhine invasion quashed, all was set fair for the rest to receive their just deserts.

6

OUT OF AFRICA

TO THE VICTOR, THE PRIZES: Constantius' achievements did not go unrewarded. From 411, he was supreme commander of the western army. Other honours swiftly followed as his successes multiplied. On 1 January 414 he received the supreme ceremonial honour of the Roman world, the award of a first consulship. In the old Republic, the two consuls annually elected had wielded real power, but the consulship had long ago ceased to incorporate any function. Since, though, all official documents were dated according to the names of consuls, it carried with it a promise of immortality, and, given that one of the two was often also an emperor, it retained all its cachet. The next year, *patricius* (Patrician) was added to Constantius' list of titles – this too meant nothing in practice, but the search was on for titles to express his special pre-eminence.

On 1 January 417 he became consul for the second time, and – even more significant – received in marriage the hand of Galla Placidia, the emperor Honorius' sister, whom he had forced the Visigoths to return. Their first child, the strong-minded princess Iusta Grata Honoria, was born about a year later. Shortly after, Placidia fell pregnant again, this time with a son, Valentinian, who was born in July 419. The emperor Honorius was still childless, and no one had any doubt by this date that he would remain so. Constantius, Placidia and their children were the first family of the western Empire. Still, however, Constantius wasn't finished. On 1 January 420, he became consul for the third time: then, on 8 February 421, inexorable political logic led to the final accolade. Married to the emperor's sister, father of the heir apparent and for the last decade effective ruler of the Empire, he was finally proclaimed co-Augustus by Honorius. A new golden age seemed to be unfolding. Fate, however, wasn't working to the same script. On 2 September, not quite seven months after his coronation, Constantius died.

Life – and Death – at the Top

TO UNDERSTAND the catastrophic effects of Constantius' sudden removal, we need to consider how court politics worked in the later Roman Empire. Its public face was the ceremonial pomp appropriate for a ruler chosen by God to run an Empire destined by the same Divinity to bring Christian civilization to the entire world. All ceremonies were carefully orchestrated to express the unanimity of the participants in the belief that they formed part of a divinely ordained social order that could not be bettered.

Emperors were expected to conduct themselves accordingly. The pagan Ammianus Marcellinus criticized the pagan emperor Julian, in all other respects his hero, for breaking with these norms:

> One day, when [Julian] was sitting in judgement . . . it was announced that the philosopher Maximus had come from Asia, he started up in an undignified manner, so far forgetting himself that he ran at full speed . . . and . . . kissed the philosopher . . . This unseemly ostentation made him appear to be an excessive seeker for empty fame, and to have forgotten that splendid saying of Cicero's, which narrates the following in criticizing such people: 'those very same philosophers inscribe their names on the very books which they write on despising glory, so that even when they express scorn of honour and fame, they wish to be praised'.[1]

Departing from the formalities was deliberate affectation, in Ammianus' view. But Julian wasn't alone in finding the demands of imperial deportment onerous, as Olympiodorus records: 'Constantius . . . regretted his elevation because he no longer had the freedom to leave and go off wherever and in whatever manner he wished and could not, because he was emperor, enjoy the pastimes which he had been accustomed to.'[2] This no doubt included jesting with the clowns over dinner, as he had previously liked to do. Being emperor was not just about giving orders; it also involved satisfying expectations.

But if the public face of court life was a ceremonial swan gliding effortlessly over the waters of world affairs, inside it was a hotbed of rivalry. Given that the Empire was far too large for any one man to control unaided, there had to be subordinates to see to its actual running. At the height of their dominance over Honorius, first Stilicho and then Constantius controlled top appointments, both civilian and military. In making promotions, the need was to balance practicality with politics. A well judged distribution of favour would build up a body of grateful supporters that would insulate the top man from potential rivals. Not that rivals were always easy to spot. It was, as we saw, Stilicho who suggested the promotion of his own eventual nemesis Olympius.

The official arena where this struggle for office and influence was played out was the central council of the Empire: the imperial consistory. Here the emperor and his chief officials, military and civilian, gathered for regular sessions, and real politicking was sometimes done. Ammianus records a general named Marcellus denouncing the Caesar Julian's pretensions to the full purple and crown of an Augustus, and an extremely brave Praetorian Prefect of Italy named Eupraxius telling Valentinian I, who had denied issuing an order allowing the judicial torture of senators accused in magic trials, that he had indeed just done so.[3] But business in the consistory was usually run on very formal lines. It was where all the court dignitaries lined up in order of precedence and in full ceremonial robes to receive foreign ambassadors. It was also where the ceremony of *adoratio* – kissing the imperial robe – was customarily performed. The full consistory was more often a place for announcing decisions than debating them.[4]

Much of the real business of political negotiation and policy-making took place at a further remove from the public gaze, at council sessions with a few trusted officials present or in private rooms out of sight of pretty much everybody. The decision to admit the Goths into the Empire in 376, for instance, emerged only after heated debate amongst Valens and his closest advisers, but the public face put on the decision when announced in the consistory was cheerful consensus. Likewise, Priscus tells us that when wanting to suborn a Hunnic ambassador to murder his ruler, an east Roman official invited him back to his private apartments after the formal ceremonies in the consistory were done.[5] The imperial court had to show complete unanimity in public, but knives were kept sharpened privately, and a constant flurry of rumours spread to advance friends and to destroy foes. Winning and exercising influence backstairs was how the political game was played by everyone.

The rewards of success were enormous: staggering personal wealth and a luxurious lifestyle, together with both social and political power, as you helped shape the affairs of the day and those below you courted your favours. But the price of failure was correspondingly high; Roman politics was a zero-sum game. A top-level political career generated far too many enemies for the individual to be able to take his finger off the pulse for a moment. You don't hear of many retirements from the uppermost tiers of late Roman politics. The only exit for Stilicho, as we've seen, was in a marble sarcophagus, and the same was true for many other leading figures. Regime change, especially the death of an emperor, was the classic moment for the knives to come out. It was such a moment that claimed the life of Count Theodosius (father of the emperor Theodosius I) after the sudden death of Valentinian I, and later, of the faction behind the count's death. If you were lucky it was just you who snuffed it, but sometimes entire families were wiped out and their wealth confiscated – Stilicho's wife and son were killed shortly after him. Even if a fall from grace took the form of being retired from politics, you weren't necessarily safe. As with Palladius in the Lepcis affair (see pp. 100–101), sudden exclusion from central politics was the moment your enemies would start gathering evidence and whispering, so that you never knew when an official with a warrant might knock on your door. The pinnacle of late Roman politics was for high rollers only: if you failed to stay atop the greasy pole, you were likely to end up atop a bloody one. By the year 414, the heads of no fewer than six usurpers were to be seen displayed outside the city of Carthage: two old ones (Maximus and Eugenius from the time of Theodosius I), plus four more recent ones – Constantine III and his son, together with Jovinus and his.[6]

Ammianus gives us a brilliant pen portrait of one of these late Roman grandees, Petronius Probus, prominent under Valentinian I (364–75) and after, which beautifully captures the power and precariousness of life at the top.

> [Probus was] generous and ready to advance his friends, but sometimes a cruel schemer, working harm by his deadly jealousies. And although he had great power so long as he lived, because of the sums that he gave away and his constant resumption of offices, yet he was sometimes timid when boldly confronted, though arrogant against those who feared him . . . And as a fish, when removed from its own element, does not breathe very long on dry land, so he pined away when not holding prefectures; these he was compelled to seek because of the constant lawlessness of certain families which, because of their boundless avarice, were never free from guilt, and in order to carry out their many evil designs with impunity, plunged their patron into affairs of state . . . But he was suspicious . . . and sometimes resorted to flattery in order to work harm . . . At the very height of riches and honours he was worried and anxious, and hence always troubled with slight illnesses.[7]

Arrogant yet fawning, powerful yet plagued by anxiety and hypochondria: this seems like a perfectly reasonable reaction to the average career in late Roman politics. The other element here, which Ammianus picks out so well, is the extent to which top office-holders were subject to pressure from below. Above all, they were social fixers. Their power came from being seen to do a myriad small favours, from people knowing that so much influence was within their gift. Patrons were constantly harassed by petitioners, therefore, who would go elsewhere if the particular favour was not forthcoming.[8] Once you stepped on the up escalator, it was hard to get off.

Such is the backdrop to the unexpected death of Flavius Constantius, co-emperor and effective ruler of the west, in September 421. You could be excused for thinking that he had owed his promotion to the speed and efficiency with which, from roughly the year 410, he put the western Empire back on the road. In part, this is true. Without this success, marriage to Placidia and the imperial promotion of February 421 would never have come his way. But military success by itself was not enough. Constantius also used this success to cement his position at court. As his stock rose, he could dispose of his rivals and turn an averagely important position at court into an unassailable one.

Constantius can only have been a second-rank supporter of Stilicho at the time of the old generalissimo's death, since he survived the blood-letting. The early stages of his own rise were no less violent. The fall of Stilicho was followed by several swift changes of personnel as first one and then another politician rose and fell in Honorius' favour. The rising star of Olympius, organizer of the coup against Stilicho, faded when his policy of resisting Alaric got nowhere. He was followed by Jovius, who transferred his allegiance to Alaric and Attalus when Honorius torpedoed the diplomatic settlement he was trying to negotiate. Jovius' pre-eminence was followed by that of a eunuch official of the imperial household, the *praepositus sacri cubiculi* Eusebius; but he was soon ousted by the general Allobichus, who had Eusebius killed (along with two other senior military commanders) – clubbed to death in the emperor's presence.[9]

It was at this point that Constantius burst on the scene, benefiting hugely from all the blood-letting, which generated room at the top for someone bold enough to seize it. On the grounds of an alleged connection between Allobichus and Constantine III, Constantius was able to discredit the former and have him killed. It is sometimes thought that Allobichus was in the pay of Constantine, but it may well be that he was simply in favour of a negotiated peace – which would have clashed with Constantius' desire for violent confrontation. Constantius was then able to use the political capital gained from his early successes against Constantine and Gerontius to bring Stilicho's archenemy Olympius to 'justice': his ears were cut off and, like Eusebius, he was clubbed to death in front of the emperor.

Constantius' rise to power was equally based, then, on adroit political manoeuvring. By the end of the year 411, by dint of his execution of Allobichus and his military successes against the usurpers, he had stabilized the political situation around his own person. But one major rival remained: Heraclianus, military commander in North Africa. Heraclianus' loyalty had sustained the emperor Honorius in his darkest hours of 409/10, when he kept enough funds flowing in from Africa to keep the Italian army loyal. In 412 he was duly rewarded, being appointed consul designate for the next year: the supreme accolade, short of the imperial purple. But Heraclianus was an old associate of Olympius – it was said that he had personally executed Stilicho. This may have been the original bone of contention between the two remaining stars in the western military firmament, but Constantius' success was certainly another. Granting Heraclianus the consulship before Constantius, who had achieved so much more, suggests that the emperor was trying to reassure him that his position was safe. But the African commander was not reassured, and in spring 413, when Constantius was busy organizing the overthrow of the usurper Jovinus, he brought an army to Italy. The sources accuse Heraclianus of wanting the purple for himself, but he may just have wanted to destroy Constantius' influence over Honorius. Either way, he failed. His army was defeated by one of Constantius' lieutenants, and he himself was assassinated by two of Constantius' agents on his return to Carthage.[10]

Constantius' pre-eminence was based, then, on a mixture of outright victories, uninhibited back-stabbing and a little clubbing. With Heraclianus' defeat, he had now removed all his major rivals. Even so, the further stages of his ascent were to be far from smooth. Photius preserves for us this account of his marriage to Placidia:

> When Honorius was celebrating his eleventh consulship and Constantius his second [AD 417], they solemnized Placidia's marriage. Her frequent rejections of Constantius had made him angry at her attendants. Finally, the Emperor Honorius, her brother, on the day on which he entered his consulship [1 January], took her by the hand and, despite her protests, gave her over to Constantius, and the marriage was solemnized in the most dazzling fashion.[11]

Some have supposed that she still loved Athaulf, her dead Goth, but Placidia clearly wasn't keen on being used as a pawn in a strategy that closely imitated the one that had allowed Stilicho to marry his two daughters, in quick succession, to Honorius. While the emperor was clearly happy enough to hand over to Constantius the kind of power that Stilicho had enjoyed, his sister was much less keen.[12]

So nothing was easy for Constantius in his rise to pre-eminence. He had had to fight every inch of the way; even his promotion to the purple had been opposed by Constantinople, and the political establishment in the west had hardly rolled over in submission. Marriage to Placidia may have put Constantius beyond the reach of any rival, but his power had been built on a stack of bodies. On his death in 421, everyone in high office was a Constantian appointee, and all placed him at the centre of their political calculations (including those nursing plans for his removal). As in most one-party states, there was no successor-in-waiting – Constantius had seen to that. Honorius was incapable of politicking, so it remained for the leading subordinates that Constantius had left behind to devise amongst themselves a new pecking order. The result was more than a decade of political chaos, until a semblance of order finally re-emerged in the mid-430s.

After Constantius: The Struggle for Power

ROUND ONE of the struggle was quite short, lasting from the death of Constantius to the death of Honorius less than two years later, on 15 August 423. The game at this point still consisted of winning and retaining the confidence of the emperor. First off the blocks was his sister, who had the advantage of having been raised to the purple and having received the rank of Augusta when her husband became Augustus. As well as her own interests, she needed to safeguard those of her son by Constantius, Valentinian, potential heir to the throne. But there was nothing automatic in his progression to the purple. Succession, as we saw in Chapter 3, usually operated on a dynastic basis, but only if there was a plausible heir, one who could command general consent. Varronianus, infant son of the emperor Jovian, for instance, disappeared without trace after his father's death, because no one had any interest in backing his claims. Placidia thus cosied up to her brother – to the extent that Olympiodorus reports a whiff of scandal in the air:

> The affection of Honorius towards his sister grew so great after the death of her husband Constantius that their immoderate pleasure in each other and their constant kissing on the mouth caused many people to entertain shameful suspicions about them. But as a result of the efforts of Spadusa and of Placidia's nurse, Elpidia, and through the cooperation of Leontius, her steward, this affection was replaced by such a degree of hatred, that fighting often broke out in Ravenna and blows were delivered on both sides. For Placidia was surrounded by a host of barbarians because of her marriages to Athaulf and Constantius. Finally, as a result of this flare-up of enmity and the hatred as strong as their previous love, when Honorius proved the stronger, Placidia was exiled to Byzantium with her children.[13]

Unfortunately, at this point we are dependent on Photius' brief summary of Olympiodorus' account, so that it is not exactly clear who was on whose side. 'Spadusa' is possibly an error for 'Padusia', the wife of an army officer called Felix.[14] We know, too, that another senior military commander, Castinus, was involved. The fragment goes on to tell us that a third officer, Boniface, Heraclianus' successor in Africa, stayed loyal to Placidia throughout her travails. The broad outlines, at least, are clear: Placidia tried to sustain her family's position by monopolizing her brother's affections, and attracted some support from among the military; but other interest groups prevailed, managing to prise brother and sister apart. The result was Placidia's exile to Constantinople late in the year 422.

The manoeuvring continued in her absence, but was brought to a halt with the death of Honorius a few days short of his thirty-ninth birthday. All bets were now off, and round two of the struggle for power in the west began.

Placidia having departed with Valentinian for the east, there was no obvious candidate for the throne. The many highly capable subordinates, whom Constantius had promoted, were jockeying for position. Power was eventually seized, after a few months, by the Chief Notary, John. Having lined up the necessary support in the top military and bureaucratic echelons, he was declared Augustus on 20 November. In Africa, Boniface kept himself aloof. John's most prominent backer was the general Castinus (whom we saw involved in palace plotting before Honorius' death). The regime had one other significant military supporter in the person of Aetius, who held the prominent court post of *cura palatii* (Curator of the Palace). Aetius had first achieved prominence while still an adolescent on being sent on two occasions either side of the year 410 as a hostage to barbarian allies. He spent three years with Alaric's Goths (405–8), followed by a stint with the Huns (perhaps in 411–14). The latter would have repercussions, as we shall see.

With the western military establishment divided, a key factor would clearly be the attitude of the eastern court of Theodosius II. John promptly sent an embassy requesting recognition, but the ambassadors were roughly received and sent into exile around the Black Sea. We don't know how much debate was involved, but Theodosius and his advisers, encouraged perhaps by the fact that Boniface had refused to throw North Africa into the ring on John's side, eventually decided to send an expeditionary force to Ravenna to uphold dynastic principle and the claims of his first cousin Valentinian. So Placidia and her son were despatched to Thessalonica, where Valentinian was proclaimed Caesar on 23 October 424 by Theodosius' representative, the Master of Offices Helion. A father-and-son team of generals – Ardaburius, recently victorious over the Persians, and Aspar – were sent with an army, together with a third general by the name of Candidianus. At first, all went according to plan. Moving up the Adriatic coast of Dalmatia, they took the two important ports of Salona and Aquileia. But then disaster struck. A gale blew Ardaburius off course. He was captured and taken to Ravenna, where John tried to use him as a hostage. But the plan backfired because Ardaburius was able to sow dissent amongst John's supporters, probably by stressing the size of the expedition on its way from Constantinople. As Olympiodorus' history tells us:

> Aspar came quickly with the cavalry, and after a short struggle John was captured through the treachery of his own officials and sent to Aquileia to Placidia and Valentinian. There his hand was first cut off as a punishment, and then he was decapitated, having usurped power for a year and a half.[15]

Theodosius then had Valentinian sent on to Rome where, on 23 October 425, Helion proclaimed him Augustus – Valentinian III – and sole ruler of the west.

THE WHOLE EPISODE was a triumphant reaffirmation of the political unity of the two halves of the Empire. An eastern expeditionary force had put a legitimate scion of the house of Theodosius back on the western throne, and the alliance was secured by the betrothal of the young Valentinian III to Licinia Eudoxia, daughter of Theodosius II. Olympiodorus chose this moment to bring his work to a close, his history of disaster and reconstruction in the west climaxing with this greatest of recent triumphs.[16] But there was still a problem. Far from ending the political instability, the installation of Valentinian III merely redefined it. A six-year-old boy cannot rule an empire, even in the hands of so capable and experienced a mother as Galla Placidia. The race was now on among the grandees of the western court, and particularly the military, to see who could secure a pre-eminent influence over the boy emperor.

In the conflict that followed, his mother was a major protagonist. The fragmentary records indicate that she aimed to sustain a balance of power in which no one figure among the military or bureaucratic elite should become too dominant. The main contenders for power and influence in the years after 425 were the leaders of the three main western army groups: Felix, Aetius and Boniface. In Italy, the main man was Felix, whose wife Padusia may have played a role in sowing dissent between Honorius and Placidia. He was senior central field army general (*magister militum praesentalis*). In Gaul, Aetius had replaced Castinus, who had been commanding general there under John's regime. The story of Aetius' survival in the new set-up is a significant one. When John had been faced with the overwhelming force of Theodosius' eastern expeditionary army, he sent Aetius, because of his old hostage connections, to the Huns to buy mercenary support. Aetius failed to arrive in time to save his master, but eventually turned up on the fringes of Italy with a huge force of Huns – sixty thousand, according to one source.[17] A deal was struck. For a moderate price, Aetius persuaded the Huns to go home, in return for which the new regime retained his services and sent him off to Gaul as military commander. Boniface, the third contender for power and loyal to Placidia throughout, remained commanding general in North Africa.

For a while, Placidia's strategy just about worked. The threatened dominance of first one figure, then another, was kept in check, if not entirely smoothly. Slowly, however, the situation fell out of the Augusta's control. Felix made the first move. Accusing Boniface of disloyalty, in 427 he ordered him to return to Italy. When he refused, Felix sent forces to North Africa, but they were defeated. Then Aetius stepped in. On the strength of some military successes in Gaul against Visigoths (426) and Franks (428) (to which we will return in a moment), he felt confident enough to move against Felix. Perhaps his successes had won him new favour with Placidia, or perhaps personal extinction was the price of Felix's failure against Boniface, but in 429 Aetius was transferred to Italy and to the post of junior central field army general. The sources don't permit us to be certain of what exactly happened next, but in May 430 Aetius had Felix and his wife arrested for plotting against him. They were executed at Ravenna. Three had become two, and high noon was fast approaching for Boniface.

Aetius seems to have lost a little ground at court after he got rid of Felix. Perhaps, once again, Placidia was fearful of the dominance of one unchallenged generalissimo. Boniface was therefore recalled to Italy, seemingly while Aetius was absent in Gaul again; and Boniface too was promoted to the post of central field army general. Aetius immediately marched to Italy with an army, and met Boniface in battle near Rimini. Boniface was victorious, but also mortally wounded; he died soon afterwards. His political position, and the struggle with Aetius, were immediately taken up by his son-in-law Sebastianus. After the defeat, Aetius first retreated to his country estates, but after an attempt was made on his life, he turned to the Huns, as he had in 425. In 433, he returned to Italy with enough Hunnic reinforcements to make Sebastianus' position untenable. The latter fled to Constantinople, where he would remain for over a decade. Next, Aetius secured the post of senior central field army general – his position was now unchallenged. On 5 September 435 he adopted the title Patrician to express the pre-eminence that he had finally, and with so much difficulty, achieved.[18]

The Road to Morocco

TWELVE YEARS of political conflict, involving two major wars and a minor one, had finally produced a winner. By a combination of assassination, fair battle and good fortune, Aetius had emerged by the end of 433 as the de facto ruler of the western Empire. This kind of court drama was nothing new. It was, as we have seen, a structural limitation of the Roman world that every time a strong man bit the dust, be he emperor or power behind the throne, there was always a protracted struggle to determine his successor. Sometimes, the fall-out was far worse than that witnessed between 421 and 433. Diocletian's power-sharing Tetrarchy had brought internal peace to the Empire during 285–305, but the price was horrific: multiple, large-scale civil wars over the next nineteen years, until Constantine finally eclipsed the last of his rivals. This was a much longer and bloodier bout of mayhem than what took place in and around Italy between the death of Constantius and rise of Aetius.

There was nothing that unusual, then, in the jostling for power that took place during the 420s; but there was something deeply abnormal about its knock-on effects. While a new order was painfully emerging at the centre, the rest of the Roman world would usually just get on with being Roman. The landed elites carried on administering their estates and writing letters and poetry to one another, their children busied themselves with mastering the subjunctive, and the peasantry got on with tilling and harvesting. But by the second and

third decades of the fifth century there were untamed alien forces at large on Roman soil, and during the twelve years after the death of Constantius they were occupied with more than the business of being Roman. As a result, if the events of 421–33 were in themselves merely a retelling of an age-old Roman story, the same was not true of their consequences. Political paralysis at Ravenna gave the outside forces free rein to pursue their own agendas largely unhindered, and the overall effect was hugely detrimental to the Roman state. For one thing, the Visigothic supergroup settled so recently in Aquitaine got uppity again, aspiring to a more grandiose role in the running of the Empire than the peace of 418 had allowed them. There was also disquiet among some of the usual suspects on the Rhine frontier, particularly the Alamanni and the Franks.[19] Above all, the Rhine invaders of 406, the Vandals, Alans and Suevi, were on the move once again.

They were, as we saw in Chapter 5, in origin rather a mixed bunch. The Alans, Iranian-speaking nomads, as recently as AD 370 had been roaming the steppe east of the River Don and north of the Caspian Sea. Only under the impact of Hunnic attack had some of them started to move west, in a number of separate groups, while others were conquered. The two groups of Vandals, the Hasdings and the Silings – each under their own leaderships like the Gothic Tervingi and Greuthungi of 376 – were Germanic-speaking agriculturalists living, in the fourth century, in central-southern Poland and the northern fringes of the Carpathians. The Suevi consisted of several small groups from the upland fringes of the Great Hungarian Plain. This odd assortment of peoples may have made common cause in 406, but they were far from natural allies. First, the Hasdings and Silings and Suevi could certainly have understood each other, even if speaking slightly different Germanic dialects, but the Alans spoke another language entirely. Second, as far as we can tell, both Vandal groups and the Suevi are likely to have shared the tripartite oligarchic structure common to fourth-century Germanic Europe: a dominant, if quite numerous, minority free class, holding sway over freedmen and slaves. Tied to a nomadic pastoral economy, however, the Alans' social structure was completely different. The one comment about them of any substance comes from Ammianus, who notes that slavery was unknown amongst them, and that everyone shared the same 'noble' status.[20] Whatever the particular terms used to describe it, a more egalitarian social structure is natural to nomadic economies, where wealth, measured in the ownership of animals, has a less stable basis than the ownership of land.[21]

Although rather odd bedfellows, then, the press of events prompted these groups to learn to work together, and this happened progressively over time. Even before crossing the Rhine, Gregory of Tours tells us in his *Histories*, the Alans under King Respendial rescued the Hasdings from a mauling at the hands of the Franks.[22] We have no idea how closely the groups cooperated in Gaul immediately after the crossing, but in 409, in the face of the counterattacks organized by Constantine III, they again moved en bloc into Spain. By 411, when the threat of any effective Roman counteraction had disappeared, the groups went their own separate ways once more, dividing up the Spanish provinces between them. As we saw, the Hasdings and Suevi shared Gallaecia, the Alans took Lusitania and Carthaginensis, and the Siling Vandals Baetica (map 8). The fact that they took two provinces indicates that the Alans were, at this point, the dominant force in the coalition, as their crucial role in the events of 406 might also suggest, and the Spanish chronicler Hydatius confirms.[23] These arrangements lasted for the first half of the 410s, when the coalition partners were left in peace: happy immigrants from the north soaking up the sun and wine of Spain.

It was, however, only the briefest of idylls. Constantius was tackling the western Empire's problems in order, and once usurpers and Visigoths had been dealt with in Gaul, the survivors of the Rhine invasion were next on the list. Between 416 and 418, the Silings in Baetica (part of modern Andalucía) were destroyed as an independent force, their king Fredibald ending up at Ravenna; and the Alans suffered such heavy casualties, Hydatius reports, that: 'After the death of their king, Addax, the few survivors, with no thought for their own kingdom, placed themselves under the protection of Gunderic, the king of the [Hasding] Vandals.'[24] These counterattacks not only returned three Hispanic provinces – Lusitania, Carthagena and Baetica – to central Roman control, but also reversed the balance of power within the Vandal–Alan–Suevi coalition. The previously dominant Alans suffered severely enough to be demoted to junior partners, and for three of the four groups a much tighter political relationship came into force. Hasding Vandals, surviving Siling Vandals and Alans were all now operating under the umbrella of the Hasding monarchy. In the face of both the greater danger and the greater opportunity that being on Roman territory brought with it, much in the manner of Alaric's Gothic supergroup, by 418 the loose alliance of 406 had evolved into full political union. A second barbarian supergroup had been born.

How the difficulty posed by integrating Germanic-speaking Vandals with Iranian-speaking Alans was overcome is something we can only guess at, and the differences in social structure must also have posed problems. I suspect that the official title adopted by the Hasding monarchs from this point on – *reges Vandalorum et Alanorum*, 'kings of the Vandals and the Alans' – was much more than a polite sop to public opinion: more likely, it was a shorthand way of expressing a reality of only limited integration. The panic generated in these groups by Constantius produced a coalition of about 70–80,000, capable of putting an army of 15–20,000 into the field.[25]

After his initial successes against the Silings and Alans in Spain, Constantius had brought the action to a temporary halt, so as to settle the Visigoths in Aquitaine.[26] This brought a respite to the former Rhine invaders which Gunderic, head of the new Vandal-Alan supergroup, seems to have used in 419 to try to bring the Suevi, and their king Hermeric, under his control as well. The difficult mountainous territory of northern Gallaecia enabled the Suevi to resist, but they were struggling under a blockade. Then, imperial counteraction resumed in 420, when a Roman officer by the name of Asterius broke up the blockade, presumably not wanting Gunderic to increase his following still further. At this point, Constantius' death intervened. In 422, another joint Roman-Visigothic campaign began against the Vandals and Alans, who had now retreated into Baetica. Given the amount of time the Empire took to organize anything at all, the necessary arrangements may well have been put in place by Constantius before his death.

Two substantial Roman military contingents – one under Castinus, probably from the Gallic field army, the other under Boniface, possibly from North Africa – now combined with a large force of Visigoths to attack the Vandals. But if the political uncertainty at court hadn't prevented the campaign from starting, it certainly ruined its progress. Boniface broke with Castinus, presumably over the exile of Placidia, and retreated to Africa. The campaign continued, with Castinus at first seeming on the verge of another victory, conducting a successful blockade of his opponents which, according to Hydatius, had reduced them virtually to the point of surrender. But, again according to Hydatius, Castinus then 'recklessly' engaged in a set-piece battle, which, thanks to the 'treachery' of the Visigoths, he lost. Hydatius provides no details about this treachery, however, and for reasons of his own he hated the Visigoths, so I am uncertain about the reliability of his reporting here.[27] The loss of Boniface's contingent cannot have helped, but it's much more likely that what we are really seeing in Castinus' defeat is the overall effect of Vandal-Alan unification. Whereas, four years before, a combined Roman-Visigothic force had been able to defeat the two groups individually, the newly united force was much more able to resist. On his defeat, Castinus retreated north to Tarragona to think again. But before a further campaign could be launched or a new strategy formulated, Honorius was dead, and Castinus returned, as we noted, to become senior general in Italy under the usurper John. Political chaos at the centre had ruined any plans for exterminating the survivors of the Rhine invasion.

From 422, while the knives came out in Italy, the Vandals and the Alans were left in peace again. Not surprisingly, events in Spain attracted little attention from the chroniclers, given the star-studded mayhem going on at court, and we hear nothing at all about Vandals or Alans between 422 and 425. After this date, however, they were active for three years in rich districts of southern Spain: their capture of the cities of Cartagena and Seville are the two highlights mentioned by Hydatius. But from their experiences during Constantius' ascendancy in the later 410s, these people knew perfectly well that, when a new supremo eventually emerged at court, they would be public enemy number one. They were in Spain by force, and had never negotiated any treaty with the central imperial authorities. So, while presumably making the most of the extended interregnum, they also knew that they needed to be making longer-term plans for their future.

In 428, on Gunderic's death, leadership of the Vandals and Alans passed to his half-brother Geiseric. The sixth-century historian Jordanes, in his history of the Goths known as the *Getica*, gives us a pen portrait of the new king, who would go down in Roman circles as the epitome of barbarian cunning:[28] 'Geiseric . . . was a man of moderate height and lame in consequence of a fall from a horse. He was a man of deep thought and few words, holding luxury in disdain, furious in his anger, greedy for gain, shrewd in winning over the barbarians and skilled in sowing the seeds of dissension to arouse enmity.' Whether

the new policy was entirely his own, or whether it had been slowly evolving in the second half of the 420s, is unclear, but Geiseric now had his sights set on Africa. The move was a logical solution to the Vandals' and Alans' problems. What they needed was a strategically safe area; in particular, somewhere as far away as possible from any more Roman-Goth campaigns. Africa fitted the bill perfectly – it was only a short hop from southern Spain, and much safer. Seaborne operations always pose many more difficulties than land-based ones, and the logic of this kind of move had presented itself to others before. In late 410, after the sack of Rome, Alaric had moved his forces south to Messina with their wholesale transfer to North Africa in mind. His successor Vallia contemplated the same move from Barcelona in 415. In both cases, storms had wrecked such shipping as the Visigoths had managed to muster, and the attempts were abandoned. The Vandals, though, had had much greater leisure to lay their plans. While in southern Spain, they had begun to establish relationships with local shipowners, which had allowed them, amongst other things, to raid the Balearic Islands. Such raids were just a warm-up for the main event, allowing the Vandals to orient themselves, formulate a plan, and get hold of the required shipping. In May 429 Geiseric concentrated his followers at the port of Tarifa, near modern Gibraltar, and the expedition to Africa began.

We have quite a lot of written source material generated in the heat of the subsequent conflict, but unfortunately it largely denounces rather than describes the activities of the Vandal-Alan supergroup. Amongst other things, we have some of the letters of St Augustine who was caught up in the action and eventually passed away when the Vandals were besieging his episcopal see of Hippo Regius, together with a set of contemporary sermons written for an audience in Carthage. Geiseric had recently declared his allegiance to the so-called Arian form of Christianity as espoused by Ulfilas (see Chapter 3), which may well have spread to the Vandals from the Visigoths in the early 410s. The Vandals not only did all the normal damage that an invading army does, but also targeted Catholic Christian institutions and expelled some Catholic bishops from their sees. What the sources transmit, therefore, is not detailed information, but the outrage of good Catholics in the face of persecuting heretics.

The big question left unanswered is: how, exactly, did Geiseric get his army across the sea? It used to be argued, for instance, that the

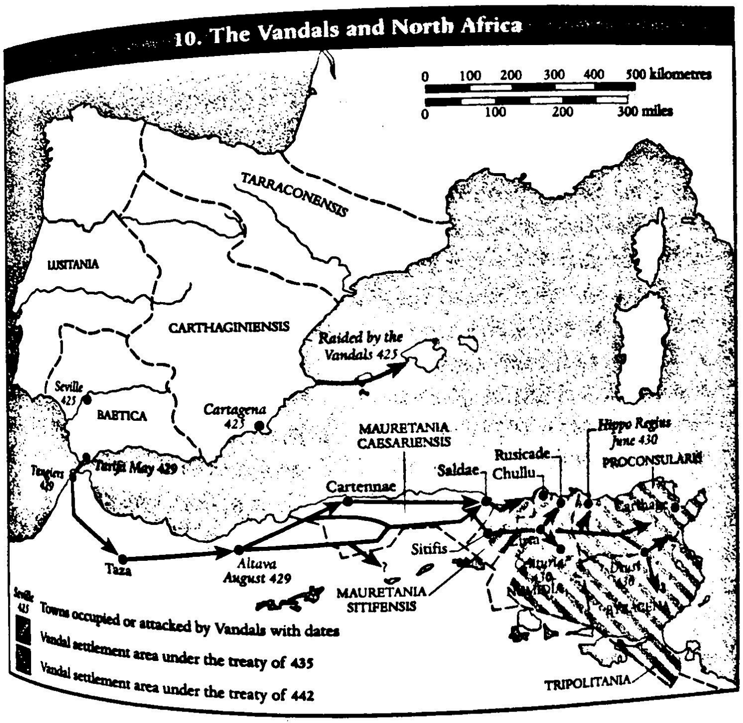
Vandals and Alans went a long way east from Tarifa by sea, landing close to Carthage itself. If so, where was the Roman army of North Africa? According to the listings of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which records the state of the Roman field forces in or around the year 420, Boniface, the count of Africa, had at his disposal 31 regiments of field army troops (a minimum of 15,000 men), as well as another 22 units of garrison troops (at least 10,000 men) distributed from Tripolitania to Mauretania.[29] It is normally reckoned that, for a successful landing, a seaborne force needs five or six times more troops than land-based defenders. So if, as we think, the Vandal-Alans could put into the field at best maybe 20,000 warriors, they shouldn't have stood a chance, especially since they were also bringing with them large numbers of noncombatants.

The Constantinopolitan historian of the mid-sixth century, Procopius, tried to explain this conundrum by supposing that, faced with his own possible extinction in the three-way struggle for control of the young Valentinian III, the senior Roman commander in Africa, Count Boniface, invited the Vandals and Alans into his province – although even Procopius supposes that he later repented of the deed.[30] But there is no reference to any such treachery on Boniface's part in contemporary western sources (even after he was defeated by Aetius), and if you think about it, such an invitation would not make any sense: by 429, Boniface had made his peace with the imperial court, so he would have had no reason to invite them into Africa at this point.[31]

The real explanation for Geiseric's success is twofold. First, on simple logistic grounds, it is nigh inconceivable that he could have got together enough shipping to move his followers en masse across the sea. Roman ships were not that large. We know, for example, that in a later invasion of North Africa an east Roman expeditionary force averaged about seventy men (plus horses and supplies) per ship. If Geiseric's total strength was anywhere near 80,000, he would have needed over 1,000 ships to transport his people in one lift. But in the 460s the whole of the western Empire could raise no more than 300, and it took the combined resources of both Empires to assemble 1,000. In 429, Geiseric had nothing like this catchment area at his disposal, controlling only the coastal province of Baetica. It is overwhelmingly likely, therefore, that he would not have had enough ships to move all his followers in one go.

To move a hostile force piecemeal into the heart of defended Roman North Africa would have been suicidal, offering the Romans the first contingent on a plate, while the ships went back for the second. So rather than trying to move his force a long distance by sea, Geiseric simply made the shortest hop across the Mediterranean, from modern-day Tarifa across the Straits of Gibraltar to Tangier (map 10): a distance of only 62 kilometres – even a Roman ship could normally make it there and back again inside twenty-four hours. For the next month or so, from May 429 onwards, the Straits of Gibraltar must have seen a motley assortment of vessels shunting Vandal-Alans across the Mediterranean. The intinerary is confirmed by the chronology of the subsequent campaign. It was not until June 430, a good twelve months later, that the Vandals and Alans finally appeared outside the walls of Augustine's town Hippo Regius, about 2,000 kilometres from Tangier, having travelled there by the main Roman roads (map 10). As the Allies found in late 1942 and early 1943, much of the area is far too rough and rugged for any straying off the beaten track, and

10. The Vandals and North Africa


0 100 200 300 400 500 kilometres
0 100 200 300 miles
TARRACONENSIS
LUSITANIA
CARTHAGINIENSIS
Raided by the Vandals 425
Seville 425
BAETICA
Cartagena 425
Tangiers 429
Tarifa May 429
MAURETANIA CAESARIENSIS
Hippo Regius June 430
PROCONSULARIS
Rusicade
Chullu
Saldae
Cartennae
Carthage
Sitifis
Taza
Altava August 429
MAURETANIA SITIFENSIS
TRIPOLITANIA
Seville 425 Towns occupied or attacked by Vandals with dates
Vandal settlement area under the treaty of 435
Vandal settlement area under the treaty of 442

the Vandals were presumably hauling a wagon train to boot. French historians have busily calculated that, having finally assembled itself during the summer of 429, the force then moved east towards Hippo at a comfortable average of 5.75 kilometres a day.[32]

This also explains why the seaborne landing was successful. By choosing Tangier, Geiseric did not land his men in Roman North Africa proper. Tangier was the capital of Rome's westernmost possession in North Africa, the province of Mauretania Tingitana (modern Morocco). More than two thousand kilometres to the west and separated by the barren mountains of the Er Rif, it was in fact so far from the heart of Roman North Africa that, administratively, it was part of Spain (map 1). Its defence, correspondingly, was not the responsibility of the Count of Africa, but of the Count of Tingitana. He had under his command five field army regiments, which might be reinforced by a further eight units of garrison troops, giving a grand total of thirteen units, or maybe 5–7,000 men. However, the main job of the garrison troops had always been to police the comings and goings of nomads, and it must be extremely doubtful whether they were really up to set-piece confrontations with Geiseric's battle-hardened force. It had fought its way from the Rhine to Spain, and, at least from its unification in 418, had shown itself capable of standing up to major Roman field armies. The mismatch was even greater than first appears. As we saw in Chapter 5, Constantius responded to the huge losses suffered by western field armies after 405 by promoting garrison troops into mobile field army units. Of the force available to the Count of Tingitana, only two regiments were real field army units; the other three were promoted garrison troops.[33] So he had maybe 1,000, at best 1,500, decent-quality troops with which to frustrate Geiseric's designs. This despatches any idea of a contest, and with it, any mystery surrounding the Vandal-Alan coalition's ability to get ashore.

Once disembarked, the coalition headed slowly east. The one possible cross-check we have on their progress is an inscription from Altava, dated to August 429, which records that one of its leading inhabitants had been wounded by a 'barbarian', but whether of the Berber or Vandal-Alan variety we do not know. After Altava, 700 kilometres from Tangier, there was only another thousand or so to go before the invading force hit the richest provinces of North Africa: Numidia, Proconsularis and Byzacena. The sources give us no details of the march, but a great deal of vituperative rhetoric:

> Finding a province which was at peace and enjoying quiet, the whole land beautiful and flowering on all sides, they set to work on it with their wicked forces, laying it waste by devastation and bringing everything to ruin with fire and murders. They did not even spare the fruit-bearing orchards, in case people who had hidden in the caves of the mountains . . . would be able to eat the foods produced by them after they had passed. So it was that no place remained safe from being contaminated by them, as they raged with great cruelty, unchanging and relentless.

Stirring enough in its own way and probably fair historical colour, but not much help when it comes to historical reconstruction. Finally, on the borders of Numidia, the advancing horde was met by Boniface and his army. Boniface was defeated, and retreated to the city of Hippo Regius, where in June 430 a siege began that would last for fourteen months. While Geiseric's main army got on with the business of besieging, some of his outlying troops, lacking credible opposition, spread out across the landscape. Leaving devastation in their wake, looting the houses of the rich and torturing the odd Catholic bishop, they moved further west towards Carthage and the surrounding province of Proconsularis.[34]

Boniface's failure to hold the line was the result of the same financial stringencies that had hampered Constantius' reconstruction of Empire everywhere outside Italy. In the fourth century there had been no field army in North Africa, only garrison troops under a *dux* (duke), supplemented when necessary by expeditionary forces sent from Italy. By 420, and probably from rather earlier, Africa had acquired a field army commander (a count rather than a duke), and a substantial field force (see p. 268). Of the thirty-one regiments only four – maybe 2,000 men – were top-grade imperial field army units. Augustine, in a letter of 417, reports on the good job that Boniface, then a regimental commander, had done with just a small force of barbarian allies in securing the North African provinces against the new threats.[35] I take it that these allies will have been some or all of the four units. But the reinforcement was only small-scale: apart from these four, Carthage had to make do with the same old forces that the Empire had always maintained in Africa.

When Geiseric finally trudged into Numidia, therefore, it was the Tingitana story all over again, but on a larger scale. Boniface did what he could, but the Vandal-Alan coalition was much more awesome than the Berber nomads that most of his troops had been trained to deal with. The key North African provinces were now under direct threat, and the future of the western Empire lay in the balance. For while the province of Mauretania Tingitana in the far west was in no sense imperial heartland, Numidia and its two eastern neighbours, Proconsularis and Byzacena, clustered around their administrative capital Carthage, were a different matter. These provinces played such a critical role in the Empire's political economy that it is no exaggeration to state that, once the siege of Hippo had begun, Geiseric's forces were looming directly over the jugular vein of the western Empire.

Jewel in the Crown

Two PICTORIAL representations of Roman North Africa survive in medieval copies of late Roman originals. Between them, they take us to the heart of the region's role in the western Empire. The first is the Peutinger Table, a copy of a fourth-century Roman world map made at Colmar in the Rhineland about the year 1200. It shows the inhabited world, stretching from Spain and Britain (all but fragments of which are missing) through the Mediterranean world, and on as far as India. The scroll is 6.82 metres long but only 34 centimetres deep: the world as you've never seen it before. Highly elongated, its proportions betray the place of its manufacture: about five-sixths of the total is devoted to the Mediterranean, and about a third just to Italy itself. North Africa appears as a line at the bottom, strung out below the west coast of Italy. Immediately below an elaborate Rome is a hardly less impressive representation of Ostia, Rome's great port. Through Ostia passed the tribute of Empire on its way to the capital. Clearly visible are its lighthouse, breakwater, quays and warehouses. Immediately below Ostia is a considerably more modest representation of Carthage, capital of Roman North Africa, given just a couple of towers. But for all its geographical oddity, the Table focuses our attention on a triangular relationship of key importance to the western Empire: Rome–Ostia–Carthage.

The nature of this relationship emerges clearly from the other late Roman image of North Africa: the *Notitia Dignitatum*, as well as its military lists, also gives us an illustrated list of the main civilian office-

holders of the Empire, along with their staffs. The upper half of the picture accompanying the post of Proconsular Governor of Africa shows, between an inkstand and a desk (on which is pictured the official's letter of appointment), a female representation of the province holding out sheaves of corn.[36] Below, ships loaded with sacks of grain strike out across the sea. By the fourth century, Carthage was the port from which North African grain tributes flooded into Ostia, to be offloaded on to carts and smaller boats for the shorter trip inland and upstream to Rome. Carthage and its agricultural hinterland were responsible for feeding the bloated capital of Empire. But keeping the capital fed was no more than a specific application of a much more general point. By the fourth century AD, North Africa had become the economic powerhouse of the Roman west.

Given its ancient past, there is an irony here. The city of Carthage was founded in 814 BC, or thereabouts, as a Phoenician colony. And once it had come to dominate its hinterland, it spent a fair part of the next seven centuries vying, often violently, with Rome for mastery of the western Mediterranean. In 146 BC, when Carthage was captured after the three-year siege that ended the Third Punic War, the whole city was destroyed and its site symbolically ploughed with salt to prevent any resurrection of this great enemy of Rome. It seems odd, from the modern perspective, to think of North Africa, now very much on the periphery of the western European economy, as the powerhouse that it was back then. When the European colonial powers moved into the region in the nineteenth century, they were staggered by the wealth of its Roman remains – as tourists often are today – especially by the contrast between those remains and their barren and deserted surroundings.[37]

Most of the African continent north of the 15-degree parallel now consists of 10.25 million square kilometres of desert. Beneath it is a sunken water table, which, topped up by as little as 100 millimetres of rain each year, maintains a dispersed network of oases. In the very ancient past, the area was much more humid and the water table higher, and the nineteenth-century Europeans originally supposed that part of the answer to the prosperity of Roman North Africa lay in the fact that agricultural conditions had been considerably better then. But the land had dried up long before the rise of Rome, certainly by 2000 BC. The only holdover by Roman times of this different ecological era was the survival close to the Mediterranean of lions, elephants, giraffes and other animal species now confined to sub-Saharan Africa. North African hillsides may also have been wooded, but otherwise conditions were the same in the Roman period as they are today.

There are exceptions to the pattern of African aridness north of the 15-degree parallel: Egypt is watered by the Nile, for example. The Maghreb, heartland of Roman North Africa, receives rain from nearby uplands.[39] In the modern world, the Maghreb comprises Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco, an extensive landscape caught between the Atlas Mountains and the Mediterranean, varying between 300 and 500 kilometres from south to north over its 2,200-kilometre length from the Atlantic to the Gulf of Gabes. Hilly and interspersed with patches of desert, the region's agricultural possibilities are defined by the exact distribution of rainfall. Where the average is 400 millimetres per year or more, wheat can be grown straightforwardly. The broad river valleys of Tunisia and the great northern plains of Algeria, together with parts of Morocco in the west, fall into this category. Where precipitation is between 200 and 400 millimetres, some kind of irrigation is required, but Mediterranean dry farming can still be practised. Where rainfall is between 100 and 200 millimetres, olive trees will grow – olives requiring less water, even, than palm trees. The North African climate, then as now, was a constant, and had the potential for a wide range of produce.

The first Roman Africa, ruled directly from Rome after the destruction of Carthage in 146 BC, comprised only a small part of the Maghreb: about 13,000 square kilometres of northern and central Tunisia, bounded by the 'royal ditch' (*fossa regia*) which stretched from Thabraca to Hadrumetum (modern Souss). This territory was divided into 700 square-metre blocks. Apart from six small towns that had supported Rome in the war against Carthage, many of these blocks were kept as public property, rented out to settlers under long-term leases, while some were sold off to Roman magnates with money to invest. To this great sell-off is attributed the fact that in the fourth century AD many old Roman senatorial families (such as Symmachus') still possessed large estates in this territory – lands that had been passed down and shuffled around over the ages by inheritance and marriage. The rest of the Maghreb was still in the hands of local dynasts, but over the next century these individuals were increasingly sucked into the Roman orbit, while Roman settlers began to move beyond the confines of the royal ditch. As with so much of the Mediterranean, these developments paved the way for the extension of direct Roman rule: first into Numidia (modern eastern Algeria) in the time of Julius Caesar (46 BC), on the pretext that the last of the local kings had supported his great rival Pompey; then, under Claudius, when two provinces were created in Mauretania (western Algeria and Morocco). From that point on, all of the Maghreb was Roman, although for geographical reasons it came to be administered in two parts: western Mauretania Tingitana run from Spain, and Mauretania Sitifis, Numidia, Proconsularis and Byzacena run from Carthage.

From early on, the Roman authorities grasped the potential of the well watered coastal lands to provide grain for Rome. Caesar's expanded province of Africa – called 'New Africa' (*Africa Nova*) – was already shipping to the capital 50,000 tons of grain a year. One hundred years later, after the expansion of direct rule, the figure was 500,000 tons, and North Africa had replaced Egypt as the city's granary, supplying two-thirds of her needs. A substantial process of development was required to guarantee and facilitate this flow of grain.[40]

The first priority was security. In a view heavily coloured by nineteenth- and twentieth-century experience, French archaeologists, some of them military men, considered that 'civilized' Roman life in the region must have been under constant threat from indigenous Berbers pursuing a more pastoral lifestyle. Air surveys in the 1930s revealed two lines of fortification and a series of fortified houses and storage facilities in the pre-desert, which were taken as proof of habitual confrontation. No doubt, as on all Rome's frontiers, small-scale raiding was a constant irritant. It could also lead to larger-scale trouble. The Lepcis affair (see pp. 100–101) began, we noted, when a neighbouring tribal leader was burned alive in the city for unspecified crimes, then escalated into a more serious confrontation. But this clearly didn't happen often, and even the larger-scale conflicts were not that large. Throughout the first three centuries of its existence, Roman Africa required no more than one legion and a range of auxiliary forces (a maximum of 25,000 men) to guarantee peace and stability throughout its vast extent. Britain, by contrast, needed four legions.

More recent re-evaluations of Roman fortifications in North Africa have shown, from the distribution of men and installations, that their main job was actually to manage nomads, not to fight them. North African nomads go south into the pre-desert in winter, when there is enough water there to generate forage for their animals, and back north into the more agricultural regions in summer, when the desert dries up. Roman soldiers and forts were there to make sure that the flocks didn't stray on to other people's crops. The Romans, in fact, seem to have got on reasonably well with the nomads: they were happy enough to buy their wares, even offering them substantial purchase-tax breaks, which doesn't really fit with a story of constant struggle.[41] Even in the fourth century, the main Roman force in Africa consisted of garrison cavalry, much more suited to patrolling and chasing the occasional raider than to heavy fighting.[42]

Once security issues had been sorted out, the region's infrastructure could be developed. Roman legionaries eventually constructed over 19,000 kilometres of roads in the Maghreb, both for their own military purposes and also to allow the easy movement of goods, such as the grain that arrived by cart at Carthage and the other ports. Carthage itself encompassed both beauty and functionality. It was in fact a double port, inherited by the Romans from the founding Phoenicians. A channel from the sea led into the outer, originally rectangular, harbour. From here a further channel led into the inner, circular harbour, with the 'admiralty island' in the middle; ships were able to dock both against the outer walls and alongside the island. Taking this as their basis, the Romans increased the size of the outer, rectangular, harbour, and turned it, under either Trajan or Hadrian in the early second century AD, into a hexagon. The other hexagonal port known from antiquity, significantly enough, was that of Ostia (built by Trajan). At the end of the second century or the beginning of the third, the circular port was brought back into commission, a classical temple was constructed in the middle of the island, and a grand colonnaded boulevard led from there into the town centre. By about AD 200, the city was equipped to handle shipping on a massive scale. And Carthage was only one of a series of ports along the North African coast: Utica, for instance, could handle 600 ships.[43] The docks at Lepcis Magna in Tripolitania were also revamped in the early third century.

As we saw in Chapter 3, the governmental capacity of the Roman state was at all periods limited by its primitive bureaucratic technologies. It tended to contract out, recruiting private parties to fulfil vital functions on its behalf. The African grain tax, or *annona*, was a classic case in point. Rather than finding and monitoring the thousands of labourers that would be required to operate the huge public estates that had come into its hands in North Africa, it leased land out to private individuals in return for a portion of the produce. Since the state wanted to lease out as much land as it could, the terms of these tenancies were made as attractive as possible. The emphyteutic lease allowed tenants heritable land more or less in perpetuity, plus the possibility of selling their leases on to a third party.

Shipping problems were similarly handled. By the fourth century the Empire had built up a powerful guild of shippers, the *navicularii*, who had to fulfil certain obligations to the state (though not every shipper was a member of the guild). The law codes make clear the broad principles on which the relationship between state and shippers was organized. The provision of shipping – operating not just out of Africa, but also in other parts of the Empire, particularly Egypt – was the first priority. With typical subtlety, therefore, the imperial authorities made membership of the guild an hereditary obligation, legislated against all possible means of exemption, and required that any land that had once been registered to a shipper should always be retained by a member of the guild, even if sold on, so that the guild's financial base could never be eroded. In return, the state then proceeded to buttress the shippers with financial and other privileges. They could not be liable to any additional tax or public service obligations, and were protected against any claims on their property by relatives. Guild members were eventually awarded equestrian rank (equivalent to the status of a medium-level civil servant); they were allowed tax reductions on their own transactions, and had up to two years to fulfil a state commission. Sometimes they also received state assistance in refurbishing their ships.[44] The state thus generated a powerful masonry of shipping magnates, with wide-ranging financial and legal privileges.

All of this, of course, the state set in motion for its own purposes. But such large-scale commerce stimulated the local economy too. If, in the first century and a half of Roman Africa (down to about AD 100), the focus was on grain production, during the next it was on olive oil and wine. Since both vines and olives require less water than grain, farmers were able to exploit the wider range of Mediterranean conditions available in the region. From about 150 to 400, with subsidized transport and land available on excellent terms, North Africa was booming.

The evidence is multi-faceted. It has long been realized that the buildings and inscriptions of North Africa indicate the flourishing here, after it had begun to decline elsewhere in the Empire, of a political culture typical of the high imperial period in which individuals competed for power on their town councils.[45] Recent rural surveys have confirmed that this local prosperity was based on agricultural expansion, with both numbers and prosperity of rural settlements increasing dramatically, as farmers pushed down from the north into the drier fringes where only the olive could flourish. By the fourth century, olive groves could be found 150 kilometres inland from the coast of Tripolitania, where there are none today. All of this confirms more anecdotal, but nonetheless suggestive, evidence, such as the inscription celebrating the octogenarian whose life's work it had been to plant 4,000 olive trees.[46]

Equally arresting is the huge amount of evidence demonstrating the ability of African goods to penetrate markets right around the Mediterranean. Our knowledge of this is based on archaeologists' newly developed skills in identifying olive oil and wine amphorae made in North Africa. Also very widely distributed were North African fine wares such as dinner services, especially of the red-slip variety. Given that transport costs were usually prohibitive except for high-value goods, the question arises as to how it could have been profitable to trade outside Africa in staples like wine and olive oil, grown everywhere around the Mediterranean, or in relatively cheap products such as dinner services. The answer lies in the state-subsidized transport system. This allowed shipping costs to be reduced through a little creative accounting, other goods to be sent piggy-back with state shipments, and African products to compete right across the Mediterranean. The state organized an economic infrastructure for its own purposes and the locals took advantage of it, so that private enterprise was able to operate within the state's version of a command economy.

And it wasn't just settlers from Italy who flourished. The kind of irrigation regimes being used in the late Roman period in North Africa were actually ancient and indigenous: everything from terraced hillsides – to catch water and prevent soil erosion – to cisterns, wells, dams, to full-blown and carefully negotiated water-sharing schemes such as that commemorated on an inscription from Lamasba (Ain Merwana).[47] These traditional means of conserving water were simply being applied more vigorously. The possibility of selling agricultural surpluses made it worth people's while to make the best use of every available drop of water and to increase production. This happened not just in settler communities but everywhere else as well, including such old tribal centres as Volubilis, Iol Caesarea and Utica. Demand hit the African countryside in a big way. Nor were nomads excluded from the action: not only did they provide crucial extra labour at harvest time, working the farms in travelling gangs, but their goods atttracted preferential tax treatment. The results could be spectacular. There is an inscription recording the success of one landless labourer turned harvest gang leader, who made enough money to buy a patch of land and a place of honour on the council of his hometown, Mactar.[48]

Over time, the flourishing provinces of Roman North Africa acquired a suitably impressive capital. Although played down pictorially in the Peutinger Table, fourth-century Carthage – or to give it its full Roman name, Colonia Iulia Concordia Carthago – was a teeming Roman metropolis. It is well known to us both from texts, not least the writings of St Augustine, and from recent excavations on the site. Abandoned soon after the Islamic conquest of North Africa at the end of the seventh century, it sat there like a fossil over the intervening centuries, waiting to be recovered. As a result, we can fill out in quite extraordinary detail the description of Carthage contained in a fourth-century survey, the *Expositio Totius Mundi* (*The Description of the Entire World*):

> Its [urban] plan is completely worthy of praise; in fact, the regularity of its streets is like that of a plantation. It has a Music Hall ... and a port that is quite curious in appearance, which seems to provide, as far as one can see, a calm sea with nothing to fear for ships. You will find there an exceptional public amenity, the street of the silversmiths (*vicus argentariorum*). As for amusements, the inhabitants get excited about only one spectacle: the games of the amphitheatre.[49]

Not what you might find in a modern guidebook, but ancient urban life was all about imposing a rational, civilized order on a barbarian wilderness (see Chapter 1), and nothing symbolized this better than a nice, even street grid. As the *Expositio* implies, the city also had more than the standard stock of public buildings. Apart from the music hall and amphitheatre, it also boasted a theatre and, from the early third century, a 70,000-seater circus for chariot-racing. Down on the waterfront was situated the large, second-century Antonine bath complex, and in the centre of the city around the Bursa Hill were the law courts, municipal buildings and the governor's palace. Here too was the domed Hall of Memory, where Boniface was assassinated.

Around the public buildings was a host of private dwellings. Some of the grander ones have been excavated, several producing extensive ground plans showing richly coloured mosaics: notably, the 'House of the Greek Charioteer' and the poetically named 'Villa with private bath'. But most of the area of the city where the majority of its population is likely to have lived has not yet been excavated, and we know of relatively few 'ordinary' dwellings. Everything suggests, however, that Carthage was home to about a hundred thousand people, a figure exceeded in the fourth century only by Rome and Constantinople, both of whose populations were artificially swollen by subsidized food supplies.

The public buildings hosted a wide range of cultural pursuits.[50] Religions of all kinds were practised, from Christianity in its various forms to the traditional pagan cults, with every kind of eastern mystery in between. And amidst all this, classical culture flourished too. Augustine, for example, was a first-rate Latinist who had completed his education in Carthage. He stayed on for a while to pursue his teaching career, at one point winning a Latin poetry competition. The prize was presented by the Proconsul of Africa, Vindicianus, himself a man of considerable learning and one of a succession of well connected Romans who spent short periods, usually a year at a time, as governor of the city. (Our old friend Symmachus held the job in 373.) Such events as poetry competitions offered ambitious young Romano-Africans opportunities to attract the attention of the governor, and to use their education and culture as a path to social advancement. When he left Carthage, Augustine headed for Rome, and from there for the court of Valentinian II at Milan, speeding on the wings of recommendations provided by a range of contacts such as Vindicianus and Symmachus.[51]

Fourth-century Carthage, then, was a cultural and, above all, an economic pillar of the western Empire. Huge and bustling, it was a city where the cramped houses of tens of thousands of ordinary citizens offered a sharp contrast to the lofty public buildings and the mansions of the rich. Above all: high on productivity and low on maintenance, North Africa was a massive net contributor to western imperial coffers.

'The Last True Roman of the West'

THE REVENUE SURPLUS from North Africa was essential for balancing the imperial books. Without it, the west could never have afforded armed forces large enough to defend its other, more exposed territories. Not only in Africa, but everywhere in the Roman west, predatory immigrants had been left to pursue their own agendas largely unhindered since the death of Constantius in 421. Along the Rhine frontier Franks, Burgundians and Alamanni, particularly the Iuthungi in the Alpine foothills to the south, had conducted raids over the frontier and were threatening further trouble. In southern France, the Visigoths had revolted and were making menacing noises in the direction of the main administrative capital of the region, Arles. In Spain, the Suevi were loose in the north-west and rampaging throughout the peninsula. With the arrival of the Vandal Geiseric on the fringes of Numidia in the year 430, the sword of Damocles was hanging over the entire western Empire.

Into the breach stepped the last great Roman hero of the fifth-century west, Flavius Aetius. As we have seen, he emerged in 433 as the eventual victor in the fierce disputes that followed the accession of Valentinian III. We also know that when young he had spent times as a hostage both with Alaric in the run-up to the siege of Rome and with the Huns in the 410s, a relationship which later allowed him to negotiate Hunnic help after the collapse of John's usurpation and then to defeat his rival Sebastianus. He would never have been chosen as a hostage, of course, had he not had high political connections. His father Gaudentius, like Flavius Constantius, came from a Roman military family of Balkan origin, in his case the province of Scythia Minor in the Dobrudja (modern Romania). In his early career, attached to the eastern court, Gaudentius held a succession of staff appointments. But in 399, during the supremacy of Stilicho, we find him commanding troops in Africa. Again like Constantius, he was probably a distinguished eastern soldier who threw in his lot with Stilicho on the death of Theodosius I. Gaudentius then married an Italian senatorial heiress of huge fortune and the high point of his career was his appointment as field army commander in Gaul (*magister militum per Gallias*) in the later 410s. He was killed there in an uprising, perhaps to do with the usurpation of John in the 420s.

Aetius' own career too followed a military trajectory, but rose to greater heights. Though never emperor himself, Aetius was the Octavian of his time. Once in power, he proved himself both a mighty politician and the restorer of Roman fortunes. The pen of a contemporary, one Renatus Frigiderus, in an extract preserved by Gregory of Tours in the later sixth century, draws this portrait of the man:

> Aetius was of medium height, manly in his habits and well-proportioned. He had no bodily infirmity and was spare in physique. His intelligence was keen; he was full of energy, a superb horseman, a fine shot with an arrow and tireless with the lance. He was extremely able as a soldier and he was skilled in the arts of peace. There was no avarice in him and even less cupidity. He was magnanimous in his behaviour and never swayed in his judgement by the advice of unworthy counsellors. He bore adversity with great patience, and was ready for any exacting enterprise; he scorned danger and was able to endure hunger, thirst and loss of sleep.[52]

His skill at horsemanship and archery was perhaps another legacy of his time among the Huns, and he certainly drew on both, as well as on the other qualities described above, in tackling the great project that was his life's work: trying to hold Octavian's Empire together for another generation.

When Aetius finally took control of the western Empire in 433, the consequences of nearly ten years of paralysis at the centre could be seen right across its territories. Each of the unsubdued immigrant groups within the frontiers of the west had taken the opportunity to improve its position, as had outsiders beyond. Also, as had happened in the aftermath of the Rhine crossing, the trouble generated by immigrants triggered the usurpation of imperial power by locals. In northern Gaul, in particular Brittany and round about, disruption had been caused by so-called Bagaudae. Zosimus mentions other groups labelled Bagaudae in the foothills of the western Alps in 407/8, and Hydatius tells us in his *Chronicle* that they had appeared in Spain by the early 440s.[53] Who these people were has long been a hot topic among historians. The term originated in the third century, when they were characterized as 'country folk and bandits'. For historians of a Marxist inclination it has been impossible not to view them as social revolutionaries who from time to time generated a groundswell of

protest against the inequalities of the Roman world, and who appeared whenever central control faltered. Certainly, Bagaudae do consistently make an appearance where central control was disrupted by the hostile activities of barbarians, but the glimpses we get of their social composition don't always suggest revolutionaries. The smart money is on the term having become a catch-all for the perpetrators of any kind of dissident activity. Sometimes those labelled Bagaudae were bandits. Those of the Alps in 407/8, for instance, demanded money with menaces from a Roman general on the run. But self-help groups seeking to preserve the social order in their own localities when the long arm of the state no longer reached there, also seem to have been referred to as 'Bagaudae'. In the 410s Armorica had already asserted independence in an attempt to quell disorder; later, something similar was happening in Spain.[54]

Either way, Bagaudae plus barbarians spelt trouble. By the summer of 432, the threat was widespread and imminent: in north-west Gaul there were the Bagaudae; in south-west Gaul, Visigoths; on the Rhine frontier and in the Alpine foothills, Franks, Burgundians and Alamanni; in north-west Spain, Suevi; and in North Africa, the Vandals and Alans. In fact, much of Spain had not seen proper central control since the 410s. Given, too, that Britain had already dropped out of the western orbit, the only places in decent shape from an imperial viewpoint were Italy, Sicily and south-east Gaul.

To shed some light on Aetius' extraordinary achievement in dealing with this mess in the 430s, we have a few sparse entries in chronicles, which typically devote no more than two or three lines to an entire year's events. But we also have one extraordinary manuscript: the *Codex Sangallensis* 908, a rather tatty book from the ancient monastery of St Gall in Switzerland, just to the south of Lake Constanz. Dating from about AD 800, it contains an extensive Latin vocabulary list – just the sort of thing you'd expect to find in a good Carolingian monastery where the monks were being trained in classical Latin. But parts of the list were written on reused pages; and close inspection (in 1823) revealed that one of the palimpsest texts underneath consists of eight folios from a fifth- or sixth-century manuscript of a Latin rhetorician by the name of Merobaudes. Born in southern Spain, he was descended from an imperial general of Frankish origins who went by the same name in the 380s. His work, apart from one short religious poem, survives nowhere else, so we can thank a Carolingian monk who did a lousy job of rubbing out for the fact that any of Merobaudes' writings survive at all. Unfortunately, though, to make these few pages fit their new book, the monks trimmed them down from their original 260 by 160 millimetres to 200 by 135. All that scholars have managed to extract therefore is four short poems and the fragments of two longer panegyrics: about a hundred lines of one and two hundred of the other. (Contemporary examples of similar texts weigh in at around six hundred lines.)

As the virtuosity of his work shows,[55] our Merobaudes went through a full Latin education, then made his way to the western imperial court in Ravenna. Here another survival allows us to pick up his trail. Not only a scholar, he was also, like his ancestral namesake, a soldier, and became a devoted henchman to Aetius, serving him in his wars and afterwards singing his praises in public speeches. For all these services he was honoured, on 30 July 435, with a bronze statue at Rome, in the forum of Trajan no less.[56] That same year he was made a senator as a reward for an early panegyric to Aetius (one that hasn't survived), and fought with distinction in the Alps. He was subsequently awarded the epithet 'Patrician', and eventually became senior general (*magister militum*) commanding the Roman field forces in Spain. Not only does the case of Merobaudes show that *Romanitas*, the concept of Romanness, could still win over individual barbarians to the glories of Latin literature, but also his proximity to Aetius gives us privileged insight into how the latter wished his achievements to be viewed.[57]

The earliest of the surviving works, the hundred or so lines of the first panegyric, probably dates from the summer of 439. Not enough survives to recover anything much of its underlying argument, but its presentation of Aetius speaks for itself:[58]

> Your bed is a barren rock or a thin covering on the ground; you spend your nights in watchfulness, your days in toil; furthermore, you undergo hardship willingly; your breastplate is not so much a defence as a garment . . . not a magnificent display but a way of life . . . Then if there is any respite from war, you survey either sites of cities, or mountain passes, or the broad expanse of fields, or river crossings, or distances on roads, and there you seek to discover what place is more suitable for infantry and cavalry, more suited for an attack, safer for a retreat, and richer in resources for a bivouac. Thus even the very interruption of war is advantageous for war.

The image of the breastplate as a way of life is magnificent PR, as is that of Aetius using any respite from war to extend his strategic and tactical grasp of potential battlefields. But it wasn't just spin – it was reality. The 430s saw Aetius conduct one campaign after another, many of them successful, and all directed towards putting the western Empire back on its feet again, very much as Constantius had done two decades before.

Many of these campaigns find brief mention in the chronicles, and Merobaudes' second panegyric, written in 443 to commemorate Aetius' second consulship, lists them in order. From Aetius' accession to power in 432 to the end of the decade, the record is impressive. The run of victories had started, in fact, well before the elimination of Felix and Boniface, and was one contributing factor to Aetius' success in the struggle for power. In Gaul, from 425 to 429, he was general commanding Roman field forces, and fought successful campaigns against the Visigoths in 425 or 426, driving them away from Arles, and regained some land from the Franks near the Rhine in 427. In 430 and 431, having succeeded Felix as commander in Italy, he defeated the Alamannic Iuthungi and extinguished some kind of rebellion in Noricum,[59] then wiped out a band of Visigothic freebooters near Arles; in 432 he again defeated the Franks.

From 433, his political dominance now secure, Aetius was in a position to take more comprehensive action to stabilize the Empire. Cold reason told him that the armies of the Roman west, while still powerful, were not up to tackling every problem at once. In particular, he was facing simultaneous conflict in two different theatres: on the one hand against the various parties inside Gaul and on its frontiers, and, on the other, against Geiseric and the Vandal-Alan coalition in North Africa. Rather than dividing his forces – always a dangerous move, and one that offered little hope of success – he extracted help from Constantinople. It came in the form of the general Aspar, one of the leaders of the army that had put Valentinian on the western throne in 425, at the head of a substantial force. Aetius had learned from Constantius' one mistake. Rather than making any move on the purple himself and incurring thereby the displeasure of the dynastically minded eastern emperor Theodosius, he contented himself with exercising power in fact, but not in name, thus retaining the favour and assistance of Constantinople. On what followed, we have practically no information. We do know that, basing himself in Carthage, Aspar launched a war of containment against the Vandals and Alans, which was successful enough to force Geiseric to negotiate. A treaty was declared on 11 February 435: the Vandal-Alans received parts of Mauretania and Numidia, including the cities of Calama and Sitifis (map 9); but Aspar had managed to protect most of Numidia by the terms of the treaty, together with the two richest North African provinces, Proconsularis and Byzacena.[60]

With one flank covered by Aspar, Aetius was free to take on the problems in Gaul. Such was their severity that he needed yet more help. Constantius had used the Visigoths to help bring other invaders back under control. But the Visigoths' ambitions were now running wild, and they were anyway a part of the overall problem: too many armed foreign groups on Roman soil. What Aetius needed was military aid from outside, at least until the Visigoths could be brought back into line. It couldn't come from Constantinople because the eastern Empire was already embroiled in North Africa. His only recourse was the Huns, a force that may also have been drawn upon by Constantius. The Huns had already played a crucial role in Aetius' career. Securing their departure from Italy in 425 had saved him from certain death for supporting the usurper John, and a Hunnic army had helped him regain power in 432 after his defeat by Boniface. So his first move, as the opening lines of the surviving section of Merobaudes' second panegyric tell us, was to do another deal with them: '[Aetius] has returned with the Danube at peace, and has stripped the Tanaïs [the River Don] of madness; he orders the lands, glowing hot with blackened upper air, to be free of their habitual warfare. The Caucasus has granted repose to the sword, and its savage kings renounce combat.'

Aetius' powers, of course, ran nothing like as far as Merobaudes' language might imply. What he was trying to evoke here was the notion that Aetius had established order within the land of Scythia, north of the Danube and east of Germania. This area, as we saw in Chapter 5, was dominated by the Huns from about 420 at the latest. What Merobaudes doesn't tell us is that they forced Aetius to pay a heavy price for their support. Previously they had served in Roman armies for cash. This time, it's possible that the west was simply skint – so many expensive wars had been fought and so much of its old territory was no longer producing revenue. Or perhaps the Huns now wanted something different. For whatever reason, Aetius was forced to cede to Hunnic control Roman territory along the River Save in Pannonia. Merobaudes never refers to this, although all of his listeners must have known what had happened. The best strategy for dealing with embarrassments is often not to mention them at all. Anyway, in return for the ceded territory, Aetius won sustained Hunnic military support, and this enabled him to do much good in Gaul.[61]

As Merobaudes tells us, the threats to the frontier regions of Gaul were duly nullified: 'The Rhine has bestowed pacts making the wintry world Rome's servant, and, content to be guided by western reins, rejoices that the Tiber's domain swells for it from either bank.'

In one case, Aetius took particularly drastic action. Fed up with the incursions of the Burgundians into Belgica in 436, he again negotiated Hunnic assistance. The next year, the Burgundian kingdom suffered a series of devastating attacks (one source, Hydatius, reports twenty thousand Burgundian dead), and Aetius resettled the survivors, now chastened Roman allies, in the vicinity of Lake Geneva. The frontier secure, he then turned his attention to the Gallic interior. Roman forces with Alanic allies did a similar job on the Bagaudae of Armorica, who had revolted under the leadership of a certain Tibatto in 435. Thus by 437 the integrity of Roman rule had been restored throughout the north-west. As Merobaudes commented: 'A native dweller, now more gentle, traverses the Armorican wilds. The land, accustomed to conceal with its forests plunder obtained by savage crime, has lost its old ways, and learns to entrust grain to its untried fields.' Aetius also took steps to ensure longer-term stability in the area, settling Alans across the region in a line from Orléans to the Seine basin.

The way was now open to bring the Visigoths to heel. While he was dealing with the Burgundians in 436 a second Visigothic rebellion broke out, more dangerous than their earlier move towards Arles of the mid-420s. Again they moved south, but this time besieging Narbonne. And again, Aetius was up to the challenge. Recruiting more Hunnic auxiliaries, he launched a massive counterattack which forced the Visigoths back to Bordeaux. The violence was brought to a halt in 439 – not without some significant Roman losses – but the treaty terms of 418 were reaffirmed. The relevant section of the second surviving panegyric of 443 is missing, but the defeat of the Visigoths was evidently a recent event when Merobaudes delivered the first in 439. Its surviving fragment details Aetius' defeat of the Visigoths at

Snake Mountain ('which the ancients as if by premonition called Snake Mountain, for here the poisons of the state have now been destroyed'), and the 'sudden horror' of the Visigothic king when he viewed 'the trampled bodies' of his dead followers.[62] This barbarian people hadn't been destroyed, but they had been checked, and with a bit of help from his Hunnic friends, Aetius had done wonders to stabilize the region after more than a decade of conflict.

Similar events were unfolding in Spain. The situation there had been significantly eased by the departure of the Vandals and Alans, which left only the Suevi at large in the north-west. Where before, Merobaudes tells us, 'there was no longer anything under our rule . . . the warlike avenger [Aetius] has opened up the captive road; driven out the marauder' – actually, they left for Africa of their own free will – 'and regained the obstructed highways; and returned the people to their abandoned cities.' Some of the locals, notably the chronicler-bishop Hydatius, wanted Aetius to come down over the Pyrenees with an army, but help seems to have mainly taken the form of diplomatic pressure. A political accommodation soon followed between the Suevi and the natives of Gallaecia, and the provinces abandoned by Geiseric were put back in some kind of order.

All in all, Aetius' achievement during the 430s was prodigious. Franks and Alamanni had been pushed back into their cantons beyond the Rhine, the Burgundians and Bagaudae had been thoroughly subdued, the Visigoths' pretensions had been reined in, and much of Spain returned to imperial control. Not for nothing did Constantinopolitan opinion consider Aetius the last true Roman of the west.[63]

BUT, JUST AS Merobaudes was putting the last full stop to his latest opus in Aetius' praise, and Aetius was contemplating sending his trusty breastplate to the cleaners, a new storm burst on the horizon. In October 439, after four and a half years of peace, Geiseric's forces broke out of their Mauretanian reservation and came thundering into the richer provinces of North Africa. But it was no walkover. They had to fight their way into Carthage, as a sermon given just after the action describes:

> Where is Africa, which was for the whole world like a garden of delights? . . . Has our city [Carthage] not been punished cruelly because she did not want to draw a lesson from the correction

> handed out to the other provinces? . . . There is no one to bury the bodies of the dead, but horrible death has soiled all the streets and all the buildings, the whole city indeed. And think on the evils we are talking about! Mothers of families dragged off into captivity; pregnant women slaughtered . . . babies taken from the arms of their nurse and thrown to die on the street . . . The impious power of the barbarians has even demanded that those women who were once mistresses of many servants, have suddenly become the vile servants of barbarians . . . Every day there comes to our ears the cries of those who have lost in this assault a husband or a father.[64]

MORALIZING RHETORIC rather than straightforward account, the passage nonetheless does justice to the picture of devastation reported in other Roman sources. No other single blow could have done the Empire so much harm. At a stroke, Geiseric had removed from Aetius' control the richest provinces of the Roman west, with the result that financial crisis loomed. How was it allowed to happen? Presumably, after four and a half years of relative peace, and thinking that Geiseric was going to keep to the treaty made in February 435, people took their eyes off the ball. There was, I suspect, simply too much instability in other parts of the Empire for troops to be left in Carthage on a 'what if?' basis. The Visigothic war in particular, brought to an end just before Geiseric made his move, had probably demanded every available man. So with the Carthage garrison at minimum strength, the cunning Vandal had taken full advantage.

But autumn 439 wasn't the time for recriminations, let alone commissions of inquiry. What was needed was decisive action to return Carthage and its provinces to Roman control. At around this time, in a short poem to commemorate the first birthday of Aetius' son Gaudentius, Merobaudes commented that Rome's 'fierce leader . . . was worthy of the staff of retirement' and might one day pass on the baton to Gaudentius.[65] But now was not the moment – and again, Aetius didn't shirk his duty. The logistic limitations characteristic of the Roman Empire ruled out all thoughts of an instant counterstrike, and for now the advantage lay with Geiseric. A series of laws issued in the name of Valentinian III in spring 440 testify to the impending sense of crisis. On 3 March, special license was granted to eastern traders in order to guarantee food supplies for the city of Rome: the cutting off of the African bread dole to the capital was not the least of Aetius' worries. The same law also put in place measures to rectify holes in Rome's defences, and to ensure that everyone knew what their duty was with regard to garrisoning the city. On 20 March, another law summoned recruits to the colours, at the same time threatening anyone who harboured deserters with the direst of punishments.[66] A third law, of 24 June, authorized people to carry arms again 'because it is not sufficiently certain, under summertime opportunities for navigation, to what shore the ships of the enemy can come.'

These, however, were merely piecemeal defensive responses to anticipated Vandal raiding, which duly followed when the sailing season began. In particular, Geiseric launched a series of attacks upon Sicily, including a siege of the island's main naval base, at Panormus, which lasted most of the summer. Already, however, Aetius was thinking along broader lines, and there are allusions to his plans for restoring the situation in the law of 24 June: despite the immediate problem, confidence was expressed that 'the army of the most invincible [eastern] Emperor Theodosius, our Father, will soon approach and ... We trust that the Most Excellent Patrician Aetius will soon be here with a large force.'[67] Aetius had been out of Italy gathering all the troops he could muster, but the key to success, given the diminution in western resources since 406, was negotiating help from Constantinople. Again, Aetius' wisdom in not pushing for the purple is apparent.

Late in 440, after the onset of bad weather had forced the Vandals back to Carthage, a joint imperial army began to assemble in Sicily: 1,100 ships to carry men, horses and supplies. Aetius' 'large force' crossed to the island, and was joined there by a substantial expeditionary force from the east. No source puts a figure to the Roman forces gathered there, but the shipping was enough to carry several tens of thousands of men. The size of the eastern army is also indicated by the fact that its leadership was shared between five commanders: Areobindus, Ansilas, Inobindus, Arintheus and Germanus. Pentadius, the lucky Constantinopolitan bureaucrat in charge of logistics, was later promoted, his reward for dealing with the administrative nightmare of despatching the expedition.[68] Everything was set for the counterstroke that would return Carthage to Roman rule. Come the end of March, when sailing to and from North Africa could resume after the usual winter break, Aetius' greatest ever triumph would be within sight. But the armada never sailed, the troops of both east and west returned to their bases, and so much administrative effort came to nothing.

Cause and Consequence

WHY DID THE joint expeditionary force never sail? Some further fragments of Merobaudes' panegyric for Aetius' second consulship of 443 give us the clue. Having first enumerated his old victories of the 430s, then discussed his qualities as a peacetime leader, Merobaudes' tone suddenly changed. He turned to an image of Bellona, the goddess of war, complaining about the era of peace and plenty that Aetius had brought into being:

> I am despised. Thus all respect for my kingdom has perished owing to one disaster after another [Aetius' victories and the Vandal peace]. I am driven from the waves and I cannot rule on land.[69]

But being a self-respecting goddess of war, she is not about to take this lying down, and goes to find Enyo, her long-time ally:

> Sitting here under a jutting cliff, cruel Enyo had hidden a madness driven to flight beneath a long-lasting peace. She was distressed because the world was without distress. She groans in sadness at the rejoicing. Her ugly face is caked with hideous filth, and dried blood is still on her clothing. Her chariot is tilted back, and the harness hangs stiff. Her helmet's crest droops.

Bellona then goads Enyo to restore the 'madness' of war, and the panegyric closes with everyone recalling Aetius to his customary position at the head of Rome's armies:

> Let him [Aetius] not delegate, but wage war, and let him renew destiny with the triumphs of old; let not booty as his teacher and the mad desire for gold compel him to surrender his spirit to unceasing cares; instead, let a praiseworthy love of arms, and the sword, ignorant of Latium's blood but dripping with blood from enemy throats, show him unconquerable yet gentle.

The message is unmistakable. A new threat, well beyond anything the Vandals might pose, had arisen, and Aetius was needed back in harness to save the Roman world yet again. It was this threat that compelled the troops gathered in Sicily to return to their bases, thus leaving Carthage in the hands of the Vandals. And the western Empire would have to cope as best it could with the consequences of Geiseric's success.

Thus, in 442 a second treaty was made with the Vandals, this one licensing Geiseric's control of Proconsularis and Byzacena, together, it seems, with part of Numidia. The western Empire received back into its control the territories granted to him in 435; legal evidence confirms that it was subsequently administering the two Mauretanias (Sitifensis and Caesarensis) and the rest of Numidia.[70]

In return for peace, now that he had got what he wanted, Geiseric was willing to be generous. A grain tribute of some kind, although presumably rather diminished, continued to arrive in Rome from the Vandal provinces, and his eldest son Huneric was sent to the imperial court as a hostage. There is no doubting, though, the extent of Geiseric's success. From the status of 'enemy of Our Empire' in the law of 24 June 440, after 442 he was a formally recognized client king of the Empire, with the title *rex socius et amicus* ('allied king and friend'). Moreover, in a massive break with tradition the 'hostage' Huneric was betrothed to Eudocia, the daughter of the emperor Valentinian III. Thirty-odd years before, as we saw earlier, Alaric's brother-in-law the Visigothic king Athaulf had married Valentinian's mother Placidia, sister of the reigning emperor Honorius. But that was an unlicensed match. Now, for the first time, a legitimate marriage was being contemplated between barbarian royalty and the imperial family. The continuation of food supplies to the city of Rome probably seemed worth the humiliation.[71]

The fragments of Merobaudes' writings contain two pieces written after the conclusion of this peace. The panegyric of 443 comments:

> The occupier of Libya [Geiseric] had dared to tear down by exceedingly fated arms the seat of Dido's kingdom [Carthage], and had filled the Carthaginian citadels with northern hordes. Since then he has taken off the garb of an enemy, and has desired ardently to bind fast the Roman faith by more personal agreements, to count the Romans as relatives for himself, and to join his and their offspring in matrimonial alliance. Thus, while the leader [Aetius] regains the peaceful rewards of the toga and orders the consular chair, now at peace, to abandon war trumpets, these very wars have given way everywhere in admiration of his triumphal attire.[72]

Merobaudes suggests that nothing could have been done about the seizure of North Africa, while stressing that Aetius has made the best of a difficult situation by coaxing a suppliant Geiseric towards a peaceful alliance with the Empire. A short poem about a mosaic continues the propaganda:

> The Emperor himself in full splendour occupies with his wife the centre of the ceiling [of an imperial dining room], as if they were the bright stars of the heavens on high; he is the salvation of the land, and worthy of veneration. In the presence of our protector a new exile suddenly weeps for his lost power. Victory has restored the world to the one who has received it from nature, and an illustrious court has furnished a bride from afar.[73]

The 'exile' is Huneric, whose presence at court is a sign of his people's subjugation to Rome but whose dignity will be in part restored by the gracious marriage alliance to follow. Just like Jovian's surrender of provinces and cities to the Persians in 363, so the loss of Carthage to the Vandals and Alans in 442 was presented as a Roman victory, and for the same reasons. A God-protected Empire simply could not admit to defeat: the image of control had to be maintained, come what may.

None of this meant, of course, that the consequences of the new peace treaty weren't disastrous. In Africa, Geiseric proceeded with the kind of pay-out that his followers were expecting, and that was essential to his own political survival. To provide the necessary wherewithal, he confiscated senatorial estates in Proconsularis such as those belonging to Symmachus' descendants, and reallocated them to his followers. These estates were called *sortes Vandalorum* ('allotments of the Vandals').[74] One influential line of argument holds that the Vandals were allocated portions of the state's land tax revenue rather than full ownership of actual pieces of real estate. But decisive contradictory evidence is provided by the fact that in 484 Victor of Vita refers to Huneric as launching a persecution of Catholic Christians in those 'allotments'.[75] Proof, surely that they came in the form of pieces of land. From much nearer to the early 440s, we have supporting evidence that this was the case. Legal texts refer to there having been a substantial number of senatorial exiles from North Africa at this time, and individual examples are met in other sources. In the correspondence of a certain Syrian bishop we find a dossier of no fewer than eight letters of recommendation written for one expelled North African landowner, Celestiacus, and the case of a woman called Maria who, having spent some time in the east, was eventually reunited with her father in the west.[76] The lands confiscated from these exiles provided the wherewithal to fund the settlement.

It is also important to consider the politics of settlement from a Vandal perspective. Here was a group of immigrants who, over a thirty-three-year period, had followed their leaders from central Europe, across France, Spain, and then on to North Africa. They had slogged over thousands of kilometres, and fought countless battles against Roman troops. Many of their campaigns were successful, but these Vandals and Alans had also suffered heavy casualties, particularly in Spain between 416 and 418 at the hands of Constantius' combined force of Visigoths and Romans. And now, or at least after the peace treaty of 442, they were in secure possession of the richest provinces of the Roman west. Hardly surprising, then, if they were looking foward to a mammoth reward for everything they had endured and for the loyalty they had shown since 406. Had Geiseric not satisfied their expectations, his head would have been likely to join those of the Roman usurpers still mouldering on poles somewhere on the outskirts of Carthage. I find it impossible to believe, in these circumstances, that the Vandals and Alans would have been content with taxation grants rather than full ownership of land. But neither do I believe that they had it in mind to do much farming. It was, after all, Roman landowners, not Roman peasant tenants, that had been expelled, so it's a fair bet that the same old peasantry continued to farm the same old bits of land. The difference was that the rent was now paid to new landowners.[77]

But this is what happened in Proconsularis. The rest of North Africa under Geiseric's control, Byzacena and part of Numidia, saw no further land confiscations. Proconsularis was the best choice for the settlement, for two reasons. First, many of its landowners, because of its particular past, were absentee Roman senators like the Symmachus family, so it was the province where dispossession would cause the fewest ructions. Second, it had the strategic advantage of facing towards Sicily and Italy, where any future Roman military threat was likely to originate.

Clearly, for many Roman landowners in Africa, the arrival of the Vandals and the subsequent peace treaty of 442 was a financial and personal disaster. The state did what it could to alleviate their situation. On the fourth anniversary to the day of Geiseric's seizure of Carthage, 19 October 443, Valentinian suspended the normal operation of financial laws in the case of Roman Africans 'who are despoiled, needy, and exiled from their country'. They could not be sued by moneylenders for monies borrowed since their exile 'until the recovery of their own property', unless they were 'rich elsewhere and financially responsible'. Likewise, they were not to be pressed on financial matters pertaining to the pre-exile period, and no one was to charge them interest on their borrowings. It may well be that quite a lot had been borrowed on the exiles' immediate arrival in Italy in 439/440, since, at that time, the reconquest of Carthage was confidently expected. Once the peace of 442 was made, these hopes evaporated and Valentinian acted to protect the exiles from the consequences of bad debt. About seven years later, presumably after a lot more lobbying, the state was even more magnanimous. On 13 July 451, Valentinian published another law:

> I decree that . . . wise provision shall be made for the African dignitaries and landholders who have been despoiled by the devastation of the enemy, namely, that in so far as it is able, the august imperial generosity shall compensate for that which the violence of fortune has taken away.

In Numidia, part of which had been in Vandal hands for the seven years separating the two peace treaties, the emperor granted a five-year tax remission on 13,000 units of land, in the hope that this would enable them to be brought back into production. He also provided cash grants. In the two Mauretanian provinces of Sitifensis and Caesarensis, those who had lost their lands in Proconsularis or Byzacena were given priority in the leasing-out of public lands, and other, less afflicted landholders were expelled from their pre-existing leases.[78] Twelve years after the Vandal capture of Carthage, some of the dispossessed landowners of Proconsularis could look forward to at least a partial restitution of their fortunes by acquiring new lands in Mauretania: once again, we find the Roman state protecting its landowning classes.

The damage to the state itself could not be healed so easily. After

442, much of the revenue of North Africa, this crucial contributor to the western imperial budget, was lost outright, and the rest reduced by seven-eighths. Under the treaty, as we have seen, Byzacena and Proconsularis dropped out of central imperial control and, while some grain shipments did continue, most of their revenues were lost as well; the remaining provinces of North Africa either stayed under central control or were returned to it. On 21 June 445, Valentinian issued a tax edict covering these latter provinces, which reveals that Numidia and Mauretania Sitifensis were now producing only one-eighth of their previous land tax revenues.[79] In addition, some further tax had normally been raised from them in the form of subsistence allowances for soldiers, and here too the Africans benefited from reductions. These allowances were formally assessed in terms of food and fodder, but often commuted into a gold payment, the Africans being awarded a special commutation rate of four *solidi* (gold coins) per unit assessed instead of the usual five – effectively, a 20 per cent reduction.

The loss of its best North African provinces, combined with a massive seven-eighths reduction in revenue from the rest, was a fiscal disaster for the west Roman state. A series of regulations from the 440s show unmistakable signs of the financial difficulties that now followed. In 440 and 441, initial efforts had been made to maximize revenues from its surviving sources of cash. A law of 24 January 440 withdrew all existing special imperial grants of tax exemption or reduction.[80] In similar vein, a law of 4 June that year attempted to cut back on the practice of imperial officials – palatines – taking an extra percentage for themselves when out collecting taxes.[81] On 14 March 441, the screw was tightened further: lands that had been rented annually from the imperial fisc, with tax privileges attached, were now to be assessed at the normal rate, as was all Church land. In addition, the law cast its glance towards a whole range of smaller burdens from which the lands of higher dignitaries had previously been immune: 'the building and repair of military roads, the manufacture of arms, the restoration of walls, the provision of the *annona*, and the rest of the public works through which we achieve the splendour of public defence'. Now, for the first time, no one was to be exempt, and this was the justification offered:

> The Emperors of a former age . . . bestowed such privileges on persons of illustrious rank in the opulence of an abundant era, *with less disaster to the other landowners . . . However, in the difficulty of the present time this practice is obviously not only inequitable but also . . . impossible.*[82]

Thus the west Roman state, run by and for its landowners, in the early 440s was forced significantly to reduce the splendid range of tax benefits it had offered for so long to its most valued constituency. As the loss of tax base began to bite, the grandees at court were forced to cut down on the privileges and perquisites they had generally allowed themselves. Nothing could better illustrate the level of fiscal crisis.

Roman historians tend to consider that the late Empire spent about two-thirds of its revenues on the army, and this figure can't be far wrong. The army was bound to be the main loser, therefore, when imperial revenues declined drastically. There were no other major areas of spending to cut. And, as you might expect, the piecemeal measures of 440–1 were insufficient to compensate for the overall loss in African revenue. In the last quarter of 444, yet another imperial law admitted:

> We do not doubt that it occurs to the thoughts of all men, that nothing is so necessary as that the strength of a numerous army should be prepared for the . . . afflicted condition of the state. But we have not been able because of various kinds of expenditures to effect the arrangement of a matter . . . in which must be placed the foundations of full security for all . . . [and] neither for those who are bound by new oaths of military service, nor even for the veteran army can those supplies seem to suffice that are delivered by the exhausted taxpayers with the greatest difficulty, and it seems that from that source the supplies that are necessary for food and clothing cannot be furnished.

Playing to taxpayers' sympathies in recognizing their 'exhaustion' was a softening-up exercise: the law's central provision was for a new sales tax of about 4 per cent, to be shared equally between buyer and seller. The law went on to state, quite straightforwardly, that the Empire could not afford, on its current tax revenues, the size of army that circumstances required. There is no reason to doubt that this was so.

How big a fiscal hole the loss of North Africa made in the western Empire's budget is impossible to say, but we can work out the reduction in the armed forces implied by the revenue lost from just

Numidia and Mauretania Sitifensis. From the figures given in the law of 445 it is possible to calculate that the total tax lost from these provinces, because of the new remissions, amounted to 106,200 solidi per annum.[83] A regular comitatensian infantryman cost approximately six *solidi* per annum, and a cavalry trooper 10.5.[84] This means that the reduced tax from Numidia and Mauretania alone implied a reduction in army size of about 18,000 infantrymen, or about 10,000 cavalry. This, of course, takes no account of the complete loss of revenue from the much richer provinces of Proconsularis and Byzacena, so that the total of lost revenues from all of North Africa must have implied a decline in military numbers of getting on for 40,000 infantry, or in excess of 20,000 cavalry. And these losses, of course, came on top of the earlier ones dating from the post-405 period. By 420, as we saw in Chapter 5, heavy losses in field army troops had already been papered over by upgrading garrison troops rather than by recruiting proper field army forces. We don't have an updated version of the Notitia *Dignitatum*'s army lists (the *distributio numerorum*) for the early 440s, but if we did, they would certainly show a further substantial deterioration since 420. Only a massive new threat, therefore, could have made Aetius call off the joint east-west expedition and accept these disastrous consequences.

Where had this threat come from? Merobaudes, in the surviving fragments of the panegyric of 443 at least, is allusive rather than explicit. Bellona, goddess of war, comments:[85] 'I will call forth nations situated far away in the North, and the Phasian stranger will swim in the fearful Tiber. I will jumble peoples together, I will break the treaties of kingdoms, and the noble court will be thrown into confusion by my tempests.' Then she issues her orders to Enyo: 'Force savage crowds into war, and let the Tanaïs, raging in its unknown regions, bring forth Scythian quivers.'

Arrow-firing hordes from Scythia? In the middle of the fifth century, that could mean only one thing: Huns. And the Huns were, indeed, the new problem, the reason why the North African expedition never set sail from Sicily. Just as it was making final preparations to depart, the Huns launched an attack over the River Danube into the territory of the east Roman Balkans. Constantinople's contingent for Carthage, all taken from the Danube front, had to be recalled immediately, pulling the plug on any attempt to destroy Geiseric. Yet all through the 420s and 430s, as we have seen, the Huns had been a key ally, keeping Aetius in power and enabling him to crush the Burgundians and curb the Visigoths. Behind this change in attitude lay another central character in the story of Rome's destruction. It's time to meet Attila the Hun.